

CHURCH *and* STATE  
*in* LUTHER *and* CALVIN  
*A Comparative Study*

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*A Comparative Study*

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## Preface

THE problem of the relation of church and state has concerned Christian thinkers since the beginning of the Christian era. That men like Luther and Calvin, the subjects of this book, were deeply beholden to the biblical witness in this matter is evident from their writings. They found their main inspiration and information for their respective views on church and state in the Bible. Where it suited their purpose, the reformers also drew on the church fathers, particularly Augustine, but their main concern lay always in reinterpreting this issue as well as others in the light of their understanding of the Bible, God's holy Word. The purpose of the reformatory work of both Luther and Calvin was to restore the church of their day to the pristine beauty and basic integrity of the church of the New Testament period. What, then, do we find as we interrogate the New Testament and other biblical writers regarding their understanding of the problem of church and state? What is their view of government power and authority?

At the outset, it must be noted that the biblical attitude in this matter, regarding the powers of government, is by no means uniform. It may be better still to say that both Old and New Testament writers reveal a dialectical attitude (P. Tillich), that is, a Yes and No attitude toward the state.

In the whole Bible, one modern interpreter asserts, the idea of the sinfulness of power may be traced from the first book of Kings to the Apocalypse. Samuel, the prophet in ancient Israel, knew that the people might reject God as he instituted an earthly king (1 Sam. 10: 19). Israel was committing a grave evil by imitating other nations and desiring a king. The prophet warned the people of Israel against the fate that awaited them as they put themselves into the keeping of an earthly ruler. When they cry to God for



deliverance from the tyranny of kings, God would not hear them.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament we find the same warning against the spirit that is manifested among earthly rulers. Jesus clearly warns his disciples not to seek greatness in the fashion of the mighty of this earth. "It ought not be so among you!" is the Master's warning. In both the Gospels of Luke and John power is at times looked upon as satanic in origin. In the Fourth Gospel, particularly, Satan is called the "prince of this world." The Apocalypse of John alludes to the imperial power of Rome under the symbol of the beast or dragon (cf. Rev. 13: 1, 4, 7, 17-18).

On the other hand, both Old and New Testament writings affirm that all rulers are ultimately ordained of God and are accountable to God for their deeds. Israel's kings were anointed, and Jesus told Pilate that he would have no juridical power over him except it were given from on high. The apostle Paul, in Romans 13, clearly teaches that "every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (Rom. 13: 1-3 RSV). First Peter also evinces a positive and constructive attitude towards governmental power. Those in authority are set for vengeance on evildoers and for praise to them that do well (1 Pet. 2: 14).

Jesus, in Mark 12: 17, told his foes who tempted him: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Leopold von Ranke, the great historian of the last century, considered this word to be one of the most important and influential of all of Christ's sayings. Adolf Deissmann saw in these words a warning against the cult of the emperor. Weinell, on the other hand, held them to be a gesture of contempt and believed that one may hardly find in them a recognition of the satanic powers of worldly rulers.

This brief sketch of the biblical witness concerning earthly rulers and rulership confirms the assertion that the Bible does not contain an unreserved endorsement of political power. As we consider the behavior of early Christians, their message and faith,

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<sup>1</sup> B. Vyscheslavzeff, "Der religioese Sinn der Macht," *Die Kirche und das Staatsproblem in der Gegenwart*, 1935, p. 184.

and how they fared with the powers of government and society, we find the same dialectical attitude in their practice that we traced in their thinking or theory.

The epistles of Paul, more than any other portion of the New Testament writings, reflect the church's self-appraisal of its own intrinsic nature. Expressions like these frequently occur in Paul's letters: "the church . . . the body of Christ" or "the pillar of the truth" or "a colony of heaven." These expressions all point to the unique character of the church, which is conceived as a divine creation. In very truth, it is the church of the living God; it is the "new man" living between two worlds, a society of believers who own Jesus Christ as sovereign Lord of their lives.

This early church centered its witness and life in Jesus Christ, "in whom God had acted decisively" (Moffat) on behalf of mankind's salvation and through whose death and resurrection a "new divine order" (K. Heim) had been ushered into the world. Jesus Christ is to the churches of the New Testament period uniquely the Lord, the *Kyrios*, Lord of lords, and King of kings. He will brook no other rival beside him. Faith in this crucified and risen Lord transformed the lives of the early disciples of Jesus and propelled them into a hostile world as flaming heralds of God's grace and love. And although the message of the early church was good news, the gospel, its advocates met with opposition at every turn. Their faith clashed with the world's faith. Their God clashed with the pagan gods. Their loyalty to Christ clashed with loyalty to Caesar! True, the church also met with good will on the part of men like Gamaliel, the Pharisee, and it met with eager response on the part of many nameless men and women whose hearts opened to the gospel. But the world at large soon discovered that these Christians were indeed "a peculiar people" owning ultimate allegiance only to God as they knew him in Christ Jesus. Soon, the cry resounded in the cities of Asia Minor: "These that have turned the whole world upside down have come hither also" (Acts 17: 6).

At whatever angle the early church established contact with the world of its day, there was misunderstanding, division, strife, and conflict. An unbiased reading of Acts and of Revelation reveals that the early Christians were in deadly conflict with practically

every juridical, nationalistic, folkic, social, cultural and political force, power, and idol of their day. And this was due not to an innate nihilism, as Nietzsche and Rosenberg have claimed, or to any preconceived social or humanitarian program, but solely to the fact that these early disciples of Jesus Christ had come under the sway of one whom they firmly believed to be God's incarnate Word and— the King of their lives. For Christ's sake, they disobeyed earthly rulers when told to be silent about their Master. For Christ's sake, they endured torture, exile, and death, trusting in God's final judgment to vindicate their faith and praying like Stephen for their tormentors.

It is clear that one of the most important changes which early Christian thought brought about was the clear separation between faith and nation. In the Old Covenant, religion and *Volkstum* (nation) are closely intertwined. The New Covenant effects their severance. During the first three centuries of the Christian era the followers of Jesus continue to observe the attitude of relative approval of the state. It is only after the fourth century, in the age of Constantine, that the sharp antithesis between church and state ceases. After A.D. 380, the identification of the Christian church with the state becomes a fact of momentous significance for the future of Christianity. This new relationship between church and state obtained until about A.D. 1400. At that time, critical voices were heard in Christendom that began to question the validity of this intimate relation between the two powers. Earlier sectaries like the Waldensians had already tried to recall the church to its supremely spiritual stewardship, but in vain. St. Bernard, an adviser of popes and a mystic, had warned Pope Eugenius III in his *De Consideratione* against the beguilements of worldly power. But only after A.D. 1400 did the movement against the usurpations of the papacy in worldly concerns begin to gain momentum.

Today, it is admitted by competent Catholic historians that the epoch-making conflict between pope and emperor between the eleventh and thirteenth century was followed by untoward and unholy consequences. The papacy became involved in the highly volatile arena of power politics. Excessive claims for absolute control in both the spiritual and temporal realms by ruling pontiffs led to similarly excessive claims on the part of absolute secular



rulers. Two hundred years prior to the Reformation strong Catholic nationalist monarchies rose to contest the supremacy claims of the papacy. No wonder that, during the Babylonian captivity of the papacy in Avignon (1309-1377) and the subsequent schism (1378-1415), the prestige of the papacy sank to its very lowest. Ecclesiastical nationalism was a consequence of the schism, and soon voices all over Christendom were clamoring for a universal council to set the church's house in order. But though the popes and bishops promised reforms, nothing radically happened to change the tragic conditions in church and state. An acute secularization of the Roman Church marked the Renaissance period which, Johannes Lortz believes, "apostolic and early Christianity would most certainly have declared to be anti-Christian!"<sup>2</sup> According to this Catholic Church historian, the Reformation was practically inevitable. With Luther and Calvin the whole problem of the relation between church and state receives a new orientation.

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<sup>2</sup> Johannes Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, I, 75.

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*Part One*

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MARTIN LUTHER'S VIEW  
OF CHURCH AND STATE

## *Introduction*

THE problem of the interrelationship between church and state is one of the most crucial issues of modern Christianity. In Germany, the cradle of the Reformation, we witnessed, in the years between 1933 and 1945, during the fatal Hitler regime, a most serious clash between the churches and the Nazi government. In the United States the problem has again become acute in recent years. For this reason it may be of interest to reconsider the position that Martin Luther assumed toward it.

At the outset, we need to remind ourselves of the extreme complexity of the problem. This is partly due to the absence of a systematic treatise by the Wittenberg reformer on the matter under discussion. Yet Luther's writings contain numerous references to the matter of church and state. The difficulty of rightly appraising Luther's views is increased by the great variety of interpretations to which these views have been subjected by competent Lutheran theologians and historians. Nor must we lose sight of the fact that Luther's utterances on these subjects were, on the whole, set in the framework of a highly controversial era. Many of Luther's most important writings bearing on our problem were written in the heat of spiritual conflict and ecclesiastical warfare. This is particularly true of the famous reformatory tracts of the year 1520.

Though we shall endeavor to study objectively and then to evaluate what Luther has thought and written on the intricate problem of church and state, it is well possible that finality of judgment will not be attained and that we shall have to aim at approximate judgments on issues which were literally hammered out on the anvil of bitter conflict and strife.



## *Luther's Conception of the Church*

### I. THE REFORMER'S EVANGELICAL EXPERIENCE AS A DETERMINATIVE FACTOR IN HIS CONCEPTION OF THE CHURCH

When, in 1536, Luther opened his great disputation on the doctrine of justification he began with these words: "As you have frequently heard, most excellent brethren that this one article concerning justification, or this rather alone, establishes the true theologian, for that reason it is necessary in the Church, and as it is often repeated, so must it be frequently exercised."<sup>1</sup>

No one who is at all familiar with the basic outlook of Luther's thought will deny that if the reformer is to be rightly understood he must be understood at this particular point, that is, in his rediscovery of the biblical truth that "the just shall live by faith."

It is certain that Martin Luther tried in every possible way to achieve salvation within the Roman Church. He was a faithful and diligent monk at Erfurt and Wittenberg. But try as he might, he did not succeed. It was not because he was worse than other monks of his day who, like himself, sought eagerly to serve their God. Nor was it because Luther had a diseased inner disposition, as Catholic interpreters like Grisar or Denifle or more recently the distinguished Jacques Maritain have suggested. The latter's description of Luther's struggle that, in his case, "il n'y a là qu'une histoire classique, si j'ose dire, de moine déchu"<sup>2</sup> is surely false.

What separated Luther finally from his brethren in the flesh was the awful realization that behind the divine commandments which he tried so ardently to fulfil stood the Judge of all the earth, the holy God. As Luther tried to climb the ladder of heaven he

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<sup>1</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XXXIX, 1, 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Trois Reformateurs*, p. 112. "If I may say so, we have here nothing but a classic story of a fallen monk."

discovered that he was wholly unworthy in the sight of the living God. Neither the strictest moralism nor the *via mystica* brought comfort to his anguished soul. God seemed farther removed than ever, the more he tried to find him in the appointed way of the church to whose holy orders he had been consecrated. It dawned on Luther that the distinction between the holy world and the world of sin had broken down under the impact of divine judgment. The whole world, with its culture and refinement, its religious cults and aspirations, was still world—apart from God, lost, utterly lost.

It was in the midst of utter spiritual agony that Luther discovered that if man is ever to find God, God must first find man. God must enter not the world of pious folk, but the world of sinners in need of redemption. "The just shall live by faith," by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. That was the answer to Luther's search for a gracious God. This insight revolutionized his whole thinking. It was this *sola fide* doctrine that made Luther into the bold reformer of the church of his day. It is apparent on every page of his writings that this understanding of the nature of the Christian faith affected the entire range of his thought, particularly his ideas concerning church and state. We shall now consider in some detail Luther's peculiar conception of the church.

## II. THE CHURCH AS A FACT AND REALITY IN TIME

As one who had been reared within the Church and who felt called to bring about its purification and reform, Luther was deeply convinced of the factuality and actuality of the church of Jesus Christ in history. He writes:

Let there be no doubt that there will remain on earth a holy Christian Church till the end, as Christ speaks . . . such a Church is nothing else but the believers in Christ who believe and teach the aforementioned items and articles and who on their account are being persecuted and martyred in the world, for where the Gospel is being preached and the Sacraments are rightly used, there is the holy Christian Church. And this Church is not bound by laws and external pomp, by time and place, by persons and gestures.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.* XXX, III, 89 f.

A closer analysis of this passage reveals much of Luther's idea of the church. It is a rather comprehensive description of what the church is in its nature and operation in the world. It is, first of all, a divine reality in the midst of time. It is composed of those who believe in Christ as Redeemer and Lord. The church is a fact wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are properly administered. This passage basically agrees with the formula of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 which reads:

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. But the Church is the congregation of saints (the assembly of all believers), in which the Gospel is rightly taught (purely preached) and the Sacraments rightly administered (according to the Gospel). And unto the true unity of the Church, it is sufficient to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by men should be alike everywhere, as St. Paul says: "There is one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." <sup>4</sup>

The realism of Luther appears in his emphasis in so many of his utterances that the true church will always be a persecuted church. The first passage we have quoted reads like a page from one of Adolf Keller's latest books on the state of the church in Europe. Luther definitely felt that the Roman Church, because of its having become a church of pomp and power, had betrayed her Master. That explains his eagerness to assure those among his followers who might still be intrigued by the impressive splendor of the Church of Rome, that "Where thou hearest such Word or seeth it preached, confessed and acted upon, there be not in doubt that there is and must be most assuredly a true holy universal Church." <sup>5</sup>

### III. THE CHURCH IS GROUNDED IN AND SUSTAINED BY GOD'S WORD

The church, in Luther's thought, was not comparable to any of the ordinary organizations of men such as a club or a merchant's

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III, 11-12. Also Kidd, *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation*, p. 264.

<sup>5</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, L, 629.



society, but it was from above. The church had come into being through the Word of God, as Luther put it: "The Church does not make the Word, but it comes into being through the Word."<sup>6</sup> It was kept and sustained by the Word: "verbum enim dei conservat ecclesiam dei."<sup>7</sup> This excludes, of course, the authority of the Roman pontiff and his bishops. The latter had defined the church quite differently: "The universal Church is essentially a calling together, of all believers, virtually the Roman Church and the supreme pontiff; it is representatively the college of cardinals, virtually, moreover, the pontiff is pre-eminent."<sup>8</sup>

This definition had been advanced by Thomas Sylvester Prierias at the Lateran Council under Leo X to counteract Luther's definition of the church. The Jesuits later on, and Bellarmine in particular, developed this definition still further by stating: "The Church is a union of men of the same Christian faith by profession and of the same sacraments in communion, bound under the dominion of legitimate ministers and chiefly bound to the one Vicar of Christ in the earth."<sup>9</sup>

Over against these assertions Luther steadfastly maintained that the church is an institution "which is not maintained and built up by human words and traditions, but by the Gospel."<sup>10</sup> The gospel and its proclamation constitute the true church, not popes or bishops, or the pomp of a system that is the very denial of the truths of God's redemption. The gospel, not papal ban or interdict or the *dicta* of canon law, is the sole scepter of Christ's reign in his church. It is by the Word of the gospel: the *living* Word as spoken by its heralds, the *written* Word as contained in Holy Writ, the *attested* Word mediated through the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men,—it is through this powerful Word that men are called to repentance, and through it they come to saving faith and are made members of Christ's church.

The church that comes into being through this ever living Word of God is composed of real folk—that is, of people living on

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 491.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, III, 259.

<sup>8</sup> *Realencyclopaedia für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, X, 334.

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XIV, 415.

the earth in the midst of the contingencies of time—yet this church, in her innermost being, is invisible. It cannot be perceived by the eyes of natural man, for it is a highly spiritual reality. Here we come upon a consideration of a difficult segment in Luther's thinking, namely, as to how his numerous references to the church as being both visible and invisible are properly to be understood.

#### IV. THE CHURCH INVISIBLE AND VISIBLE IN LUTHER'S THOUGHT

It is by no means easy to unravel Luther's ideas on this matter. Well has one writer said:

We are indeed still far removed from agreement, farther than ever before. To be sure, in certain details some definite results have been attained which make further discussion unnecessary. But in basic matters the newest publications reveal contradictory views which are well nigh irreconcilable. In the final analysis it is still the question regarding the Church as invisible and visible, and the varying answers to that question bring out the most glaring contradictions.<sup>11</sup>

As we have seen above to Luther the church, strictly speaking, is neither an institution (*Anstalt*) with a hierarchical-juridical character and a system of sacramental grace centered in that order (papacy), nor is it a mere voluntary association of like-minded people forming a *Verein* for the cultivation of piety.<sup>12</sup> It is rather a spiritual entity that is being built, as it were, from above. Luther has expressed it thus: "For this reason the Church is called God's realm because God alone governs, commands, speaks, acts and is glorified in it."<sup>13</sup>

It is precisely this fact which, in Luther's mind, makes the deeper nature of the church invisible to the eyes of natural man. That means that the church, thus understood and interpreted, though it does and must find expression as an empirical or sociological entity on earth, is really an object of faith. Luther explains it thus: "This item (I believe a holy Christian Church) is as much

<sup>11</sup> D. Ernst Rietschel, "Das Problem der unsichtbar-sichtbaren Kirche bei Luther", *Schriften des Vereins f. Reformationsgeschichte*, (1932) Heft 2, Nr. 154, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Schleiermacher, *Christlicher Glaube*, 115.

<sup>13</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, VIII, 656.

an article of faith as all the others. Therefore no reason, whatever glasses it may use, may know and recognize it . . . The Church is not to be believed, but believing refers to that which one does not see."<sup>14</sup> This statement, which is found in Luther's preface to his exegesis of the book of Revelation, is reflected also in a tract which the reformer wrote against Ambrosius Catharinus where he says: "Therefore as that rock (Christ) is invisible and spiritual, to be grasped only by faith (*sola fide*), thus of necessity the Church in its sinless character must be invisible and spiritual, only comprehensible to faith."<sup>15</sup> And to another of his opponents Luther writes: "It is a high, deeply hidden thing, the Church, so that no one may either know or see it, except as it is known from Baptism, Sacrament and the Word."<sup>16</sup>

What the natural man and, to some extent, even the redeemed man beholds of the transempirical reality of the church, is the confession, by word of mouth and deed, of those who make up the empirical, visible church on earth. But these expressions can never, in Luther's thinking, establish or guarantee the reality of the church. "*Ecclesia est abscondita, latent sancti*,"<sup>17</sup> Luther reiterates over and over. Like her Lord when he came in the flesh, the church travels incognito, that is, in disguise, its real nature known only to God. The church's real presence is hidden, "not experientable," as Luther puts it, not visible to the eyes of flesh. What the latter sees is always the church's lowliness, its humility, its imperfections, yea even its shame. Luther sees in this a necessary and educational value for the sake of continued vigilance and spiritual growth on the part of believers. He sums it up in this fashion:

Therefore it is also useful and necessary that the love and fellowship of Christ and of all the saints appear hidden, invisible and spiritual, so that we are given only a bodily, visible and external sign of it. For if this same love and fellowship and comfort were public like the temporal societies of men, we should not be strengthened and exercised in coveting things invisible and eternal. All temporal and sensory things must fall away from us and we must be wholly weaned from

<sup>14</sup> *Erlangen Lutherausgabe* LXIII, 168.

<sup>15</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe* VII, 710.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, LI, 507.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, XVIII, 652.



them, if we are to come to God . . . For death makes an end of all temporal things and it separates us from men and temporal matters. We therefore need the help of invisible and eternal things and they are given us in the Sacrament and in signs to which we must cling in faith until we do receive them openly and concretely.<sup>18</sup>

In another context Luther writes:

So the glory and the power of the reign of Christ is hidden, except as through the word of proclamation it is manifested to the hearing; it cannot be known since it becomes visible in the sight of the eyes particularly as an opposite, as ignominy, infirmity, humility, extreme dejection in all the believers.<sup>19</sup>

It is apparent from these passages that Luther equated the invisible aspect of the church with its spiritual nature. The question naturally arises how, if the church be thus conceived, is its empirical reality to be understood? Does the reformer make allowance for a fellowship of persons that may be experienced in time? Is his affirmation of the hidden character of the church meant in an absolute sense? Or does Luther, as Karl Holl has claimed, know of a larger, more inclusive body, that is, an empirical church which is a "mixed church" (*ecclesia mixta*) and, in addition, to it think of the invisible church in terms of the mystical body of Christ, only perceivable to God in the ultimate sense since this mystical body is the "communion of the saints and the predestined?"

Luther scholars are quite divided on this issue. That the category of a visible-invisible church has something of the paradoxical in it, who would deny? Indeed, the whole tenor of Luther's thinking is affected by paradox. To answer the above questions the following considerations are in order.

First of all, Luther knows of no church in a Platonic sense. Though the church of Christ is invisible in its intrinsic essence, it nevertheless finds corporate expression on earth. Luther freely acknowledges his debt to the fellowship of Christian believers. In the period between 1513 to 1519 the reformer often discusses the church under the aspect of the body of Christ. This is particularly true in his lectures on the Psalms. In fact, we may say that to Luther the church is the only real fellowship on earth. He de-

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, II, 752.

<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.*, IV, 450.



scribes the involvement of the two aspects of the church's empirical and transempirical reality in words like the following:

The Church must appear in the world, but it can only appear in a disguise (*larva*), in a person, a garment, a shell or some such thing, so that one may hear, see, and comprehend it under these forms. Otherwise one would never find it. But such disguises may be a husband, a man in public or domestic life, a John, a Peter, a Luther, an Amsdorf etc. though none of these truly represent the Church, in which is neither male nor female, neither Jew or Greek, but only Christ.<sup>20</sup>

If language means anything at all, it is evident that Luther thinks of the two aspects of the church, its visible and invisible aspect, as forming an indissoluble, though inexplicable, unity. The church is one body, even as it has one supreme Head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church has three signs that manifest its presence in the world. These signs are the gospel (or the Word of God), baptism and the Lord's Supper. These signs (*notae, signae*) are the means of grace by which the church may be known. However, Luther does not admit that unbelievers—those outside the church and out of touch with Christ—can ever truly know or understand the significance of these outward signs that mark its presence on earth. Whatever the outsider sees is but the external aspect, not the hidden or inner essence of the Word or the sacraments. To the believer, on the other hand, the church is knowable under these signs, even though such knowledge is limited by and mediated through an active faith in the gospel of Christ.

It must be stated right here that men like Paul Althaus tend to deny this latter interpretation, while Ernst Rietschel and others affirm it as representing Luther's intentions. Regardless of this conflict of interpretations, it may be pertinent to refer at this point to a tract which Luther wrote in 1539 "On the Councils and the Churches." In this tract Luther elaborates on the signs that mark the church of Christ. We read:

But how can a poor, erring man know where this Christian, holy people in the world is found? First, this Christian, holy people is to be known by this, that it has God's Word, though in quite unequal

<sup>20</sup> Rietschel, *op. cit.*, p. 14, quoting from Enders, *Erlangen Ausgabe*, XIV, 175.

measure, as St. Paul says . . . This is the thing that does all miracles, sets everything in order, upholds everything, accomplishes everything, does everything, drives out all devils. Secondly, God's people is known by the holy Sacrament of Baptism, when it is rightly taught and believed and used according to Christ's ordinance. Thirdly, God's people is known by the holy Sacrament of the Altar, when it is rightly administered according to Christ's institution and is believed and received. Fourthly, the people of God, or the holy Christians, are known by the keys which they publicly use. Christ decrees in Matthew 18 that if a Christian sins, he shall be rebuked, and if he does not mend his ways, he shall be bound and cast out; but if he repents, he shall be set free. This is the power of the keys. Fifthly, the Church is known outwardly by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices which they occupy. For we must have bishops, pastors or preachers to give, administer and use, publicly and privately, the four things or precious possessions (Heiltümer) that have been mentioned for the sake of and in the name of the Church. Sixthly, the holy Christian people is known by prayer and public thanksgiving and praise to God. Where you see and hear that the Lord's Prayer is being prayed and where the use of it is being taught; where Psalms or spiritual songs are sung, in accordance with the Word of God and the right faith; where the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Catechism are openly used—there be sure that a holy Christian people is to be found. Seventhly, the holy Christian Church is outwardly known by the holy possession of the Holy Cross. It must endure all hardship and persecution, all sorts of temptation and evil (as the Lord's Prayer says) from the devil, the world and the flesh; it must be inwardly sad, timid, terrified; outwardly poor, despised, sick, weak; thus it becomes like unto its Head, even Christ! These are the true seven chief parts of the high and holy possession whereby the Holy Ghost works in us a daily sanctification and vivification in Christ according to the First Table of Moses. By their help we fulfill it, though not so fully as Christ has done; but we constantly seek to do so, under redemption or the forgiveness of sin, until at last we become quite holy and need no more forgiveness. To that end it is all directed.<sup>21</sup>

In view of these seven chief "parts of our high and holy possession" as Luther calls these signs by which even "a poor, erring man" may know what and where the church of Christ is, by which

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<sup>21</sup> Zange, *F. Zeugnisse der Kirchengeschichte*, pp. 325 f (taken from *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia ed.), V, 270-286).

even a little child may recognize it, the assertion by men like Kohlmeyer, Elert, and others that believers cannot know one another in the empirical church on earth, seems farfetched indeed. Luther, in fact, sums up the whole matter by saying, "We now know for a certainty what, where, and who the holy Christian Church of Christ is, viz., the holy Christian people of God, and these marks cannot fail—of that we are sure."<sup>22</sup> We are, therefore, inclined to agree with Ernst Rietschel's conclusions which he has expressed in the following statement:

Grisar's judgment would be completely justified (namely that Luther knows no Church in terms of a real fellowship of mutually and empirically related persons) if it were true that Luther knew of no visible Church of believers. But I insist and maintain that this is not true. And if one of the few interpreters who, following Sohm as I do, stands at this point on my side, has recently said: "It is indeed true that God alone knows his own. But that the fellowship of believers which exists on earth through Jesus Christ is only visible to God and invisible to men, is pure nonsense," I should not make this sharply expressed judgment my own, because I understand too well how one may arrive at a different opinion, but I cannot help agreeing with this writer in principle. In a Christian Church which truly represents the Body of Christ—and the Body of Christ continues to remain the most appropriate expression for what the Church is to Luther—in such a Church it cannot be otherwise than that the members also know one another within the indicated limitations.<sup>23</sup>

## V. THE CHURCH IN ITS EMPIRICAL EXPRESSION

### 1. *Luther's Idea of the Volkskirche*<sup>24</sup>

There can be no doubt that despite the fluctuations in Luther's thought with regard to the manner in which his evangelical movement was to be organized he firmly believed in the validity of the idea of the *Volkskirche*. This was largely due to the fact that the Reformation movement laid hold of villages, towns, and cities—of

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 288–289.

<sup>23</sup> Rietschel, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> The word *Volkskirche* will be retained in the discussion that follows. It is difficult to render in English. It denotes a people's church in which, as Holl points out in the above statement, all the members of a given civil or political community are incorporated.



entire communities. Karl Holl, a Lutheran historian of our day, has described this process clearly in these words:

The area within which the local Church developed was everywhere determined by the boundaries of the political community. The reformatory movement which developed within a city had the natural tendency to sweep along the entire community. The goal was to make the civic community coincide with the Church community or fellowship. Luther himself considered this tie-up with the political form to be the demand of the hour.<sup>25</sup>

Luther's advocacy of the *Volkskirche* is closely related to his rejection of the sectarian ideal of the "pure church." This Donatist error Luther believed to be the error of the Anabaptists of his day, whose real genius, I am bold to say, the reformer unfortunately failed to realize. To Luther, it was colossal pride to venture forth towards the formation of a church composed of believers only. It is quite in conformity with Luther's thought that Article VIII of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 reads:

Though the Church be properly the congregation of saints and true believers, yet seeing that in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled with it, it is lawful to use the Sacraments administered by evil men, according to the voice of Christ (Matt. 23: 2): "The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat," and the words following. And the Sacraments and the Word are effectual, by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, though they be delivered by evil men. They condemn the Donatists and such like, who denied that it was lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and held that the ministry of evil men is useless and without effect.<sup>26</sup>

We ask if, as Karl Holl affirms, Luther also held the idea of the *Freiwilligkeitskirche*, that is, the church conceived as a voluntary assembly of committed believers, and if, as the same author avows, the reformer likewise held the idea of the *confessional church*, how these two conceptions—basically biblical in character—could possibly be applied within the structure of a *Volkskirche*? That is indeed a crucial and troublesome question.

As we look at the development of Lutheranism in Germany it is only too obvious that its organization in the form of

<sup>25</sup> Karl Holl, "Luther," *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, I, 353.

<sup>26</sup> Kidd, *op. cit.*, p. 264. Cf. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III, 12.

territorial churches definitely beguiled that church into the betrayal of Luther's high ideal of the church as he had expressed it in his *The German Mass and Order of Service* of 1526.

Free churchmen have long pointed out that, with the establishment of territorial or national churches, the reformer's work suffered a grievous setback. It is a good omen that some of the present leaders of the confessional wing of the evangelical church in Germany are increasingly aware of the truth of this observation. One of these leaders is the able Lutheran pastor Hans Asmussen, a courageous preacher and profound theologian. During the German church struggle, he stated that all is not well nor has been well in the church of the Reformation. He has spoken of a two-fold falsification of the reformer's dictum that the church is the gathering of believers. Asmussen wrote:

The principle of faith that the Church is the gathering of believers has been exposed to two falsifications since the Reformation. The first is based on the idea of the people's Church (*Volkskirche*), the other on what may be called the dogmatic view of the Church, i.e., acknowledging, to be sure, in theory the faith judgment of the Augsburg Confession, while denying it in practice.

The false ideology of the *Volkskirche* acts as though the 7th article of the Augsburg Confession did not read: "The Church is therefore the congregation of the saints" but as though it read: "The Church is . . . the German people in whose midst the Gospel is rightly preached." It substitutes the people or nation for the gathering of believers. This false ideology asserts itself also in a more orthodox and theological form. This theological form of the false ideology of the *Volkskirche* reads somewhat like this: "The Church, therefore, is the sum of the baptized among whom the Gospel is rightly preached."<sup>27</sup>

Asmussen holds that, basically, the idea of the *Volkskirche* is nothing else than the error of the Roman Church with its peculiar understanding of the interrelation of nature and grace, that is, that grace perfects nature. How this ideology of a people's church, a church without distinctive norms, can be exploited to the discomfiture of the gospel's highest interest, has been demonstrated during the German church struggle in 1933-34. It was then that

<sup>27</sup> "Kirche Augsburgischer Konfession," *Theologische Existenz Heute*, Nr. 16 (1934), p. 16.

the so-called "German Christians," fanatical adherents of Hitler, most of them being pastors, carried the idea of the *Volkskirche* to extreme and absurd length. But it is significant to note right here that Asmussen, in a deep mood of repentant insight, confesses that the fight against the Nazi Christians must be a fight against the roots from which their heresy has grown. One of these roots, he asserts, has been the long established ideology of the *Volkskirche*. In the future it will no longer do to confess in the *Credo* that the church is a "gathering of believers," while denying that faith in daily practice.

Are we unjust in saying that no competent student of Luther's thought and life can deny that the reformer is largely responsible for the fatal development which his espousal of the idea of the *Volkskirche* entailed? Hans Asmussen has rightly pointed out that the discussion of this ideology is made so difficult because, as he puts it "the concept of the *Volkskirche* is an ambiguous concept. For this reason the fight in favor of the *Volkskirche* is naturally carried on with slogans. Thus, one may be told that every attack on this ideology prepares the way for the sectarian idea of the Church."<sup>28</sup> In Luther's thinking the ideas of nationhood, *Volk*, *Gemeinde* (congregation or political community) were strangely intermingled. This possibly explains the many conflicting interpretations to which Luther's ideas bearing on the church have been exposed in the research of the past one hundred years.

We cannot close our discussion in this section without at least making a brief reference to Luther's idea of baptism. We believe that the reformer's peculiar interpretation of baptism was a contributory factor towards the advocacy and final establishment of the idea of a *Volkskirche*. It is well known that in his earlier reformatory writings, written between 1517 and 1520, Luther, while not denying the sacraments as such, had nevertheless and most consistently emphasized the need of faith on the part of the recipient of baptism, that is, faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Faith and faith alone makes the sacraments efficacious. The meaning of faith is indeed so great that it may replace, should external circumstances prevent a person from receiving either bap-

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



tism or the Lord's Supper. The heart of the sacraments, Luther averred, is the Word of God's promise. Without it, all sacraments are dead and empty. Man may be saved, the reformer asserted in these earlier writings, even without the aid of sacraments but never without the Word of the living God.

But after 1522, Luther, according to many interpreters, returned more and more to a catholicizing view of the sacraments. In his tract *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, published in 1525, Luther advocated a rather strong sacramentalism. Baptism again became necessary for salvation, and this view was later incorporated in Article IX of the Augsburg Confession of 1530. On more than one occasion Luther emphasized that baptism formed the unitive bond between Evangelicals and Papists, for "the Church of Christ is the multitude of those who are baptized and called."<sup>29</sup>

Remembering Luther's great inner conflict over how to find a God gracious to the sinner, we are not surprised, however, that his view of baptism caused him considerable misgivings. For had he not been the ardent advocate of a living faith in Jesus Christ? And had he not been baptized into the fellowship of the very church which times without number he had called the "Church of Anti-christ?" Yet, despite the baptism he had received from its priests Luther found himself undone and unredeemed, even after entering the monastery and after becoming a priest of Rome and a professor of theology! His redemptive experience of the grace of God came to him in the tower long after his baptism as an infant. As late as 1525 he expressed these misgivings to Melancthon.<sup>30</sup> How did Luther resolve this dilemma? He could hold on to the doctrine of baptism of infants by holding tenaciously to the strange view that new born babes do exercise a latent faith in their baptism.

It is no wonder, then, that, in the matter of the sacraments, Zwingli and Luther could never agree. The latter wrote with withering sarcasm concerning the former: "Blessed is the man who walketh not in the counsel of the sacramentarians nor standeth in the way of the Zwinglians nor sitteth where the Zürichers are sitting." Luther took pride in having been adamant against the

<sup>29</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XIV, 190.

<sup>30</sup> Johannes Warns, *Die Taufe*, p. 73.



wiles of those "soul-murderers and soul-destroyers." Shortly before his death Luther wrote a tract entitled *Short Confession About the Holy Sacrament* in which, in the sharpest manner possible, he asserted his basic agreement with the Catholics on the matter of the sacraments, particularly that of baptism, and in which he spoke of the "wholly bedeviled hearts of the sacramentarians" and the "drunken people of Zurich." It was only logical that Luther, in this respect so much like the Roman pontiff, delegated the opponents of *his* view of the sacraments to hell.

Misgivings concerning Luther's doctrine of baptism have from time to time been expressed in Lutheran circles. Thus, Gennrich has written:

Did not Luther inject a magical and physical element into baptism, i.e., into infant baptism, by connecting the new birth with that baptism? It cannot be denied that by holding on to a traditional Church doctrine Luther involved himself in a serious problem. But the very manner in which he attempts to solve this dilemma shows how impossible it was for him in the end to conceive the new birth in terms of natural law that is operative in man through divine grace. However much he emphasized the power of the Sacraments apart from the subjectivity of the recipient, even to the point of exaggerating it at times, Luther always held on to the insight that what is so effectually mediated through Word and Sacrament, is at bottom only appropriated properly by faith. And there it remains, faith <sup>31</sup> is the new birth and it can save even without the Sacraments, when men have gone without them due to no fault of their own or due to no disregard which they might have shown. For this reason, too, Luther did not hesitate to assume a latent faith even in new born babes who receive the rite of baptism, and this he does merely in order to be able to hold on to infant baptism as the sacrament of the new birth in the fullest sense

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. with Luther's statement in his *Babylonian Captivity* that "even so it is not baptism that justifies or benefits anybody, but it is faith in the word of promise, to which baptism is added. This faith justifies, and fulfills that which baptism signifies. For faith is the submersion of the old man and the emerging of the new." In the same context we read "Thus Christ says: He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned. He shows us in this word that faith is so necessary a part of the sacrament that it can save even without the sacrament; for which reason He did not see fit to say: He that believeth not, and is not baptized . . ." *Works of Martin Luther*, II, 228, 230.

of that word—a way of thinking which to us moderns seems a counsel of despair—but perfectly reasonable to Luther for whom there is no new birth apart from faith.<sup>32</sup>

Elert, in his monumental work *Die Morphologie des Luthertums*, seems to have sensed the basic incongruity in Luther's conception of faith in relation to his attempt to provide a rationale to infant baptism. He writes in a questioning mood: "The assertion concerning the saving necessity (*Heilsnotwendigkeit*) of baptism, a ceremony that can only be conceived as an external matter, seems to be in utter contradiction to the most important concern of the evangelical position, according to which salvation eventuates exclusively through the Gospel and through faith."<sup>33</sup>

Are we unfair when we suggest that Elert might well have written that Luther's emphasis upon "the saving necessity of baptism . . . is in utter contradiction to the most important concern of the evangelical position [or starting point]"? And may one reason why the reformer of Wittenberg retained the practice of infant baptism have been the sagacious insight that this practice is indeed the very best method by which to perpetuate a national establishment of religion, that is, a *Volkskirche*?

It is of interest at this point to recall that the reformer, who at the beginning of his career was willing to break with every practice not grounded in holy Writ, who again and again and most passionately denounced tradition as a source of authority in matters of Christian faith and practice, should nevertheless, when it suited his purposes, use the very appeal to tradition in order to buttress his advocacy of infant baptism.

To show the inconsistency of Luther with regard to the authority of tradition several facts need to be pointed out. Speaking of Augustine's conversion, Luther wrote in 1522: "Augustine must have been misunderstood if people claim that he would not have believed had he not been moved by universal Christianity. That would be false and unchristian. Everyone must believe solely because it is God's Word, and because he inwardly finds it to be the truth, even though an angel from heaven and the whole world

<sup>32</sup> Gennrich, *Die Lehre von der Wiedergeburt*, p. 136.

<sup>33</sup> Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, I, 256.

should preach against it.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, as Roland Bainton reminds us, just a few months prior to this time, Luther himself had appealed to tradition against the radicals who rejected infant baptism. Since the reformer could not refute them out of Holy Writ, he was beguiled into discovering a singular miracle of God’s providence in the fact that infant baptism had never once been questioned, not even by heretics, in the long history of the church. Hence, argued Luther, to reject such age old testimony would be most impious.

The Swiss jurist Ulrich Zasius, a learned humanist, who had at first welcomed young Luther’s bold stand against the corruptions of Rome, sensed the weakness of Luther’s strategy in changing from one side to another with reference to the authority of tradition. Luther himself, after asserting that any practice like infant baptism which had lasted so long had the stamp of God’s approval, felt constrained to ask, in 1528, “What about the Papacy?” “That,” he replied, “has survived as a work of God’s wrath.”<sup>35</sup> Bainton rightly intimates that the papists must have smiled when Luther wrote (1532) these strange words:

This testimony of the universal Church, even if we had nothing else, would be a sufficient warrant for holding this article and refusing to suffer or listen to a sectary, for it is dangerous and fearful to hear or believe anything against the unanimous testimony, belief, and teaching of the universal holy Christian churches, unanimously held in all the world from the beginning until now over fifteen hundred years.<sup>36</sup>

Is it not evident that Luther, in taking this stand, departed from positions which he had previously held? Emperor Charles V used that very argument at the Diet of Worms when Luther refused to be bound by tradition.

The historian at this point must ask whether Luther never had heard of Tertullian. Did not the fiery African combat the practice of infant baptism with all his might, even though he, too, shared in the magico-sacramental conception of baptism of men like Justin Martyr, the pseudo-Clementine homilist, and Irenaeus?

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<sup>34</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe* X, II, 90.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, XXVI, 167–168. See: Bainton, “The Development and Consistency of Luther’s Attitude Toward Religious Liberty,” *Harvard Theological Review*, XXII, No. 2, p. 128.

<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXX, III, 552.



Nor could it have escaped the learned Luther that Ambrose, bishop of Milan, was not baptized as an infant but as an adult at the age of thirty-four, though he was the son of Christian parents! Jerome, the greatest scholar among the Latin fathers, though born in a Christian home in Dalmatia, was baptized by Bishop Liberius in Rome, A.D. 360, when he was about twenty years of age. Augustine, the mighty theologian and churchman, had a devout Christian mother who herself came from Christian parents. Yet he, too, received baptism in 387 after his conversion at the age of thirty-three. Gregory Nazianzen, the great Cappadocian, though the son of a bishop, was baptized at the age of thirty. The same is true of Basil the Great who also hailed from an illustrious Christian family and was baptized by the Bishop of Caesarea after finishing his university studies. Nor was Chrysostom baptized as an infant but as a mature young man by Bishop Meletius of Antioch after having undergone three years of catechumenal instruction.

Luther, therefore, not only appealed, contrary to previously defended convictions, to a tradition of fifteen hundred years, but to a tradition which was, as we have shown, by no means uncontested or uniform.

Lest it be thought that the writer is eager to condemn Luther because of his advocacy of the *Volkskirche* and the retention of the unbiblical doctrine of infant baptism, it ought again be said that the reformer tried at least to be consistent with his own emphasis upon the absolute priority of faith. Unless we can hold, Luther argued, that infants, not their sponsors, truly believe, it were better to abolish infant baptism altogether. As late as 1526 Luther, preaching on Matthew 8: 1-13, in his usual passionate manner warns against "the poison and error" of the Catholic idea of a sacrament which works salvation by and of itself, *ex opere operato*. In this same context he also censures the Waldensians who, with the reformer, stressed the need of faith as a prerequisite of being a Christian yet denied that infants whom they also baptized could exercise such faith. That attitude Luther held to be a mockery of holy baptism and using the name of God in vain. Faith, Luther was fully convinced, must somehow be present in baptism and those being baptized, otherwise the child is not delivered from the devil or from sin. To clinch his argument Luther

ended his apologetic in favor of infant baptism with these significant words: "If we then cannot prove that young children do themselves believe and have faith of their own, I should forthwith counsel that at once we let off this practice, the sooner the better and never again baptize another infant in order that we may not mock and blaspheme the adorable majesty of God by such nonsensical and magical work."<sup>37</sup>

Alas, Luther could not prove his contention that infants can believe! After four hundred years of the history of the Lutheran Church in Germany it has been proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the idea of a *Volkskirche* and its correlate, infant baptism, works to the detriment of the deeper interests of the church. Hans Asmussen wrote during the height of the German church struggle in 1934:

It is the tragi-comedy of the Evangelical Church to this very day that it has held on, to its own discomfiture and to the point of making itself utterly ridiculous, to the fiction of the "Christian Church People." The storms of the last few years were needed to make an end of that fiction. But first it had to happen that from the right and from the left people screamed into our ears—and it required considerable noise to wake up the sleeping Church—"We do not even think of wanting to be Christians. Please leave us alone!" Up to that time the Church and its leadership considered it of value that these folk, regardless of their inner attitude, helped to determine the destiny of the Church. The hope was even entertained that if these "fellow-Christians" were enlisted in cooperative endeavours they might eventually be converted in the process. This fiction still plays a decisive role in people like Kinder [Nazi Church Commissar in 1934].<sup>38</sup>

## 2. *Luther and the Idea of the Freiwilligkeitskirche*

In view of our discussion it hardly seems necessary to suggest that Luther's idea of a *Volkskirche* (where all citizens of a given community became members) and that of the *Freiwilligkeitskirche* (a voluntary association of committed believers) could not possibly be fused together. Yet we need not question the fact that the reformer of Wittenberg, for a time at least, seriously

<sup>37</sup> *Erlangen Ausgabe*, XI, 60 ff.

<sup>38</sup> Asmussen, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

avored the idea of a more or less congregationally determined church polity. As early as 1520 Luther had said that the Word of God must be the final norm for both faith and polity of the Christian church. In his *Concerning Secular Authority* of 1523, Luther affirmed "that Christ desires to have a voluntary band of followers uncoerced, neither driven by law nor the sword."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as Karl Holl has well said, Luther's strong emphasis upon the idea of the universal priesthood of all believers tended to destroy not only the idea of an institutional church but also the idea of the "indelible character" of a sacerdotal priesthood. The correlate of the idea of the universal priesthood of all believers is the autonomy of the local church. The local church, Luther pleaded, has the right to call pastors, judge sound doctrine, and determine whether ministers preach according to the Word of God. For he argued pointedly: "If they are forced to grant that as many of us as have been baptized are all priests without distinction, as indeed we are, and that to them was committed the ministry, yet with our consent, they would presently learn that they have no right to rule over us except in so far as we freely concede to it."<sup>40</sup>

In the same connection Luther argued: "Moreover, since we are all priests, how should we not have power to taste and judge what is right or wrong faith?"<sup>41</sup> From this it follows that the church—every local congregation, however small—possesses all the gifts and rights that stem from the gospel. Every local church is, therefore, in a real sense *the church* and therefore has power to judge and administer her own affairs. The competency of the local church is further indicated by Luther's admission that each individual member of it may, if necessary, call for a universal council in order, thereby, to realize needed reforms in the church at large.<sup>42</sup>

Luther expressed the ideal of the church as a voluntary group of committed Christians (*Freiwilligkeitskirche*) nowhere more clearly than in his *German Mass and Order of Worship*. This work appeared in 1526. In it, Luther distinguishes three types of church

<sup>39</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XI, 253.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 564, (*De Captivate Babylonica*) Also: *Works of Martin Luther*, II, 279.

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, VI, 412.

<sup>42</sup> *Op. cit.*, VI, 413.



services: first, the Latin Mass for the students of the universities; second, the German Mass for the ordinary laymen; third, the organized Christian fellowship for believers only.

The purpose of the Latin and the German Mass was to incite outsiders to accept the Christian faith. In other words, these services were intended to be what, in our day, we call evangelistic services. The organized fellowship of committed believers, however, was to gather all those "*die mit Ernst Christen sein und das Evangelium mit Hand und Mund bekennen wollen.*"<sup>43</sup> These were to edify one another through prayer, Bible study, the frequent reception of the sacraments, and to incite each other to works of Christian charity.

Free churchmen like Franz Spemann, Johannes Warns, Friedrich Heitmüller in Germany and scholars like Roland Bainton and A. H. Newman in America have suggested with some measure of justification that in his *German Mass* Luther came closest to the idea of a separatist, congregationally organized church. It is true that this gathering of believers in their homes was somewhat like Spenser's "college of piety" of the latter part of the seventeenth century, for it was to function within the framework of the territorial church. But where the magistrate was unfavorable, as in Bohemia, Luther favored the idea that such a congregation might become separatist.<sup>44</sup> That Lutheranism can exist and flourish on a congregational-synodal basis is attested by the vigor and growing power of the Lutheran Church in the United States. It is, therefore, to be regretted that Luther did not have the courage to actualize his ideal.

What were the reasons that Luther advanced for not applying his constructive ideals as contained in the *German Mass* to the organization of his evangelical movement? The troubled reformer wrote in that work:

But as yet I neither can nor desire to begin, or to make rules for such a congregation or assembly. I have not yet the persons necessary to accomplish it; nor do I observe many who strongly urge it. If circumstances should force me to it and I can no longer refuse with a good

<sup>43</sup> "Who would be serious-minded Christians and be ready to confess the gospel through word and deed."

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 411.



conscience, I shall gladly do my part and help as best I may. In the meanwhile the two kinds of service mentioned must suffice and I shall publicly help to foster, in addition to the preaching, such services for all the people as shall train the youth and call and provoke others to faith, until the Christians who take the Word seriously, find themselves and become insistent. If I should begin it by myself, it may result in a revolt. For we Germans are an untamed, crude, boisterous folk with whom one ought not lightly start anything except under the compulsion of a very great need.<sup>45</sup>

When Kaspar Schwenkfeld von Ossig visited Luther in December, 1525, the two men discussed at length the structure of a Christian church. Luther finally broke off the exchange of ideas by saying: "Yes, my dear Kaspar, there are not too many real Christians; I should really like to see two together; I do not know even of a single one."

This word to Schwenkfeld should not be taken too literally, for we know, on the basis of historical research, that there were a good many Spirit-filled evangelicals in Germany who eagerly waited for a man like Luther that he might organize them in Christian congregations patterned after the New Testament ideal of the church. It was not merely the lack of really earnest Christians that caused Luther to evade the summons to follow up his ideal. Perhaps the deepest reason for his hesitancy was Luther's pessimistic appraisal of the masses.

After the territorial churches had been finally established, Luther almost daily complained about the sad conditions in Protestantism. In fact, he predicted a very dark future for Germany because of the failure of the German churches to realize the gospel ideal in their corporate life and in the lives of their members. We cite at random a few of the reformer's complaints:

Among a thousand people there is hardly one true Christian.<sup>46</sup>

If the preaching of the living, active faith were rightly carried on, you would find that where now a thousand people go to the Sacrament,

<sup>45</sup> *Works of Martin Luther*, VI, 173. Cf. *Weimar Ausgabe*, X, 2, 26; XII, 693. Also, Heitmüller, *Die Krisis der Gemeinschaftsbewegung*, p. 82.

<sup>46</sup> *Erlangen Ausgabe*, II, 65. Cf. *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed*, (Philadelphia ed.) III, 236.

there would then be hardly a hundred. In a way that would be all to the good, for the abominable sinners would decrease and we should at last have a Christian congregation where we now are for all practical purposes nothing but pagans under a Christian disguise.<sup>47</sup>

For every Christian peasant you will find a thousand non Christian peasants.<sup>48</sup>

If from now on only adults and older people were to be baptized, I venture to assert that not more than a tenth of our people would allow themselves to be baptized.<sup>49</sup>

I could wish that peasants, city folk and the nobility, who now abuse the Gospel in the most shameful manner, were still under the papacy, for now they are nothing but a hindrance, shame and harm to the Gospel.<sup>50</sup>

Karl Holl has interpreted Luther's critical attitude toward the territorial and princely control of the church as "a struggle for the purity of his work."<sup>51</sup> It is no doubt true to say that Luther seriously intended to actualize as much of his church ideal in terms of organization as it was possible under the circumstances. But even Holl had to admit that "the force of circumstances was stronger than his theory."<sup>52</sup> ("die Macht der Tatsachen war staerker als seine Theorie"); that is, the territorial regime got the upper hand in church administration, even in matters of doctrine.

May it not be that "the power of circumstances" proved stronger than Luther's theory because that theory suffered from serious structural flaws which some historians have not hesitated to call tragic contradictions? Luther might have learned a lesson from the quiet Anabaptists of Switzerland, Southern Germany, and Moravia where flourishing and well-organized churches succeeded in realizing his church ideal. He might also have learned from Calvin's serious attempt to actualize his basic reformatory church ideal. But instead Luther raved in quite wild fashion against the

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, XXVIII, 315.

<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXIII, 326.

<sup>49</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXIII, 165.

<sup>50</sup> *Op. cit.*, V, 254.

<sup>51</sup> *Luther, Gesammelte Aufsaetze*, I, 379.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 379-380.

Anabaptists whom to discomfit, revile or even kill was recommended as the duty of the obedient followers of the reformer.

## VI. LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE POWER OF THE CHURCH (*potestas ecclesiastica*)

As a preliminary consideration we must keep in mind that Luther's views concerning church government developed in his polemic against the Roman hierarchy. Nor is it to be forgotten that the problem of church and state in our modern understanding of the issue did not exist as such in Reformation days. What determined decisively the thinking of the sixteenth century was the idea of a Christian society, a *corpus christianum*. Within this framework called Christendom (*Christenheit* in German; *chrétienté* in French) there existed two orders: the political order (*ordo politicus*) and the ecclesiastical order (*ordo ecclesiasticus*), or the spheres of the magistrate (*magistratus*) and that of the church (*ecclesia*). It was the task of both jurists and theologians to distinguish as well as relate the functions of these two spheres within the *corpus christianum*.

As we search the confessional standards of Lutheranism, particularly the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the AC written in answer to the Papal Confutation, and the Articles of Schmal kald, we discover six major points that describe and define the position of Luther and his fellow-reformers with regard to the *potestas ecclesiastica* or church power (*Kirchengewalt*). These points are as follows:

a. A clear distinction between the two powers or regimes, that is, between the secular power and the religious power. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession reads: "There have been great controversies touching the power of Bishops; in which many have incommodiously mingled together the Ecclesiastical power with the power of the sword."<sup>53</sup> In the same context we learn that "the political administration is occupied about other matters than is the Gospel."<sup>54</sup> These strictures are directed against the Roman

<sup>53</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III, II, 58-59. Cf. Kidd, *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation*, p. 383.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60. *Confession Augustana*, XXVIII, 11 ff.



bishops and their claims to both spiritual and worldly power. They are reminded that all claims to worldly jurisdictions and authority are invalid in the light of the gospel. Where bishops exercise such jurisdictions they function *de iure humano*. Failure in the proper exercise of such functions will entail censure by the secular power. For all worldly authority is also of God, and the church and its officials must faithfully regard and observe the distinction between these two realms. The magistracy defends not the minds, but the bodies, against manifest injuries, while the ecclesiastical power has the mandate to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Luther, in his *Concerning Secular Authority* of 1523, anticipated this distinction with rare clarity and precision.

b. The power of the church (*potestas ecclesiastica*), according to Luther, is limited to the ministry of the Word (*ministerium verbi*). The Augsburg Confession in Articles V, VII, and VIII lays down the principle that the ministry of the Word is the only office in charge of the external signs, that is, the sacraments of the church. This means that the church is held together and its unity is guaranteed not by a hierarchy but only by agreement "concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments."

The scope of the power of the church includes the power of the keys or the ministry of absolution (*ministerium absolutionis*). It also comprises the power of excommunication and church discipline which, however, are to be exercised without human coercion, solely through the Word of God.

The function of the ministry of the Word is an ordered function; hence the requirement that no one may administer the sacraments without due authority. Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession reads: "Concerning Ecclesiastical Orders, they teach that no man should publicly in the Church teach, or administer the Sacraments, except he be rightly called (without a regular call—*nisi rite vocatus*)."<sup>55</sup>

It is important to remember that the manner in which the rite is to be interpreted in practice is not explained. Here the church that possesses the right of call is free to judge according to circum-

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 1516. Also Kidd, *op. cit.*, p. 265.



stances. But under Lutheranism each church or group of churches must define and regulate the specific form of the ministry in order to protect themselves against arbitrariness and abuse.

c. The subject of the power of the church is the whole church. The Articles of Schmalkald declare that the local church is sovereign in calling a minister. No human authority can take away from the church the right to call and ordain.<sup>56</sup> It is obvious that this passage denies to the clergy the exclusive right or power of ordination. The right of call (*ius vocandi*) and the power of the keys (*potestas clavium*) belong to the church as such, not merely to certain persons in the church. The Articles of Schmalkald are quite explicit on this: "He has given therefore (Matt. 28: 19) the keys directly to the Church; for this very same reason the Church has the chief and sovereign right of calling its ministers."<sup>57</sup> This means that the power of the ministry is derived from the church. It is a mediated office. This establishes, with respect to the church and the ministry, a basic juridical principle, namely:

d. The church is not only the possessor of ecclesiastical authority, but its members are also the object of that authority. Therefore, on the basis of Luke 10: 16, obedience to the bishops is required. But that obedience is always limited and the right of the laity comes into play when these ministers fail of their duty. The ultimate right of the church to be heard must therefore not be surrendered, since the "Church has the mandate concerning the placing of ministers."<sup>58</sup>

e. A further principle derives from the foregoing, namely that there is in reality only one ministry. There is no qualitative difference between bishop and priest. The external obligations of the bishops, such as matrimonial jurisdiction, really belong to the worldly authorities, while the spiritual prerogatives belong equally to bishops and pastors.

f. The recognition of the secular authority (*Obrigkeit*) is independent of its being Christian or not. Hence, it is the duty of worldly authority to punish the wicked priest no matter what the Church (in this case, Rome) might say to the contrary. As re-

<sup>56</sup> *Articles of Schmalkald*, Tract 67.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Tract 24.

<sup>58</sup> *Apologia Confessio Augustana* XII (VII), 12.

gards the help that a Christian ruler might render the church, such help can only be based upon the fact that the ruler is a member of the church and hence a co-priest with all other believers. Wrote Luther: "Therefore we are all consecrated unto priests through baptism, as St. Peter says in I Peter 2: 9 Ye are a royal priesthood and a kingdom of priests . . . For whoever has emerged (crept out) of baptism may well boast being already consecrated priest, bishop or pope, although not everybody is fit for such office."<sup>59</sup>

Being fellow priests, the princes are "with the appointed priests adequate in all things and their office and work, which they have from God for everybody, shall not be interfered with, wherever it is expedient." Moreover, where worldly authority came to the aid of the church Luther insisted that its work be done from the motive of Christian charity and not in order to encroach upon the inner affairs of the church. Luther's intention was to limit the power of the magistracy (*Obrigkeit*) to the externals of church government, that is, to what the Enlightenment came to call the *iura circa sacra*, since the *iura in sacra* (doctrine, dogma, etc.) were, ideally at least, to be the reserve of the church's power and jurisdiction.

## VII. LUTHER'S ORGANIZATION OF THE TERRITORIAL CHURCH

We have already made a number of pertinent references to the manner in which Luther finally organized the evangelical movement. As early as 1520 Luther had appealed to the German nobles to take steps towards the reform of the church. Not that he intended the members of the nobility to undertake these reforms in their entirety, but rather that they should inaugurate such reforms by convening a general council. This for the reason that the official Roman Church refused to heed the cry for such a council. But, as both Karl Müller and Cyril C. Richardson have pointed out, Luther, in his appeal to the nobility, clearly distinguished between such things as directly concern secular authority—sumptuary laws, usury and prostitution—and those matters that specifically are

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<sup>59</sup> Weimar Ausgabe, VI, 407 f.

within the province of a general council—the strictly spiritual matters such as abolition of papal pomp, the reduction of the number of cardinals, the offensive manner in which the pope received communion, the elimination of coercive celibacy, and the doing away of irregular chapels and churches.

From this, it appears that when Luther finally appealed to the princes, particularly his own prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, he appealed to them on two grounds: First, by virtue of their office as supreme magistrates, they were duty bound to protect the German people against the thieveries of the Roman Curia. Richardson has summed up Luther's position in the matter of the abolition of these abuses extremely well. He says:

The reforms he urges contain much sound common sense and are wide in scope. His denunciation of monopolies, his contention "that we should find some bridle for the Fuggers and similar companies," his ideas for the regulation of marriages and pauperism, and his suggestions for the sumptuary laws, show him as a reformer of much practical insight and one who has at heart the well-being of his native Germany. He has a pretty clear idea of the will of God in all its relationships and he has in mind an ideal Germany of a social and political as well as of a purely religious character. "If anything," he writes, "is contrary to God's will and harmful to men in body and soul, not only has any community, council or government authority to prevent and abolish such wrong . . . but it is their duty as they value their soul's salvation." <sup>60</sup>

Therefore, wherever Luther summons the secular power to take measures against the papal annates, he is viewing these exactions as plain thievery. The oaths that the bishops of Germany have sworn to a foreign ruler, that is, the Roman pontiff, are to be abolished, since these oaths are not in accordance with God's Word and involve those who are bound by them in acts that are definitely contrary to the interests of the German people and their sovereigns. Since worldly power is to care for the bodily welfare of its subjects, these matters of civil competence which the papacy and its clergy have usurped must come again under the rightful control of secular authority. Luther argues thus: "Inasmuch as

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<sup>60</sup> Cyril C. Richardson, "Prophecy and Politics: A Study in Martin Luther," *The Review of Religion*, January, 1937, p. 140.



worldly authority has been ordered of God to punish the wicked and to protect the pious, we ought to let its office function freely throughout the whole body of Christendom, without respect of persons, be they Pope, Bishop, parsons, monks, nuns or whoever they be."<sup>61</sup>

The second reason why Luther appealed to the Christian princes to concern themselves about the church's dire plight, asking them to issue a call for a general council, lay in his doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers. In his tract *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther had said:

Since then the temporal power is baptized as we are, and since it has the same faith and Gospel, we must allow it to be priest and bishop on account of its office, an office that is proper and useful to the Christian community. For whatsoever issues from baptism may boast that it has been consecrated priest, bishop and pope, although it does not beseem every one to exercise these offices.<sup>62</sup>

In other words, wherever and whenever Christian princes assisted in the work of reform of the organization of the evangelical movement, they were to remember that they acted primarily in their capacity as fellow-Christians. Their contribution to these reforms was to be an expression of Christian charity. In matters concerning doctrine, however, the Christian prince, so Luther thought, was to act as a humble church member, even though he be the *praecipium membrum ecclesiae*. As Karl Holl has rightly put it:

It must be reemphasized here that Luther never ceased to designate the help rendered by the territorial prince as a mere work of emergency. The Elector is for him always only an "emergency bishop." One must not weaken the significance of this expression as Müller has done. Luther really thinks of two things when he uses that word, which one may detect at once, namely that the work of the Elector is but a temporary one and that the work of superintendence should properly be in the hands of real bishops.<sup>63</sup>

But, as we have previously and in a somewhat different context pointed out, Luther's ideals, both with regard to the church and

<sup>61</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, VI, 409.

<sup>62</sup> Kidd, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>63</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, I, 375.



the state, were not easily actualized in practice. Holl, the staunch defender of Luther against Rieker and Troeltsch, was in the end compelled to admit that the reformer bought the territorial prince's help at a high price. He writes:

At any rate later on (once the Church had been established with the help of the Elector) the power of the facts and circumstance proved stronger than his theory. When the Church Visitation had once begun in the name of the Elector it turned out in the end, despite all that had been said to the contrary, that the spiritual affairs were also left in his care. Nor can we overlook the fact that it was difficult for the Electoral Chancellery to distinguish clearly whether or not in one case the Elector spoke in his capacity of prince and in another in that of a fellow-Christian brother to his subjects. In any case it was more expedient to deal with all these matters in the same routine fashion. This could happen the more since from pre-reformatory days precedents had been established in favor of the control of the territorial prince . . . The price which the Evangelical Church had to pay for this establishment was high, all too high. The best energies of the Reformation were kept down through this development or they were forced to develop alongside and apart from the Church.<sup>64</sup>

The lack of clarity in Luther's own thinking, the pressure of the disturbed conditions of the times, the perpetuation of the idea of the *corpus christianum*<sup>65</sup> (Christendom), the fear of the sectaries and Luther's own conservative nature, these, together with the ambitions of some of the nobles and princes for the enhancement of their own power and prestige, led to the developments which

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 379-380.

<sup>65</sup> A long controversy has been waged between those scholars who maintain that Luther retained the idea of the *corpus christianum* and those who have affirmed that the reformer radically broke with the medieval pattern of society. Men like Rudolf Sohm, Karl Rieker, Karl Eger, Karl Müller, Ernst Troeltsch, and Georg Wünsch hold and defend the first view; while Brandenburg, Drews, and particularly Karl Holl maintain the latter view. Holl has taken issue especially with Troeltsch, seeking to deny, as T. thinks, that to Luther the idea of the *corpus christianum* always means the *corpus mysticum* and nothing else. Yet Holl had to admit finally that Luther also "knew in his own way of an all comprehending order in the world which aims at the preservation and growth of Christendom. The 'Kingdom of God' is the higher unity which subsumes the State and the visible Church and which thereby also unites them with one another." (Ges. Aufsätze I, 347).

Luther at his best could not but disapprove. As Richardson has expressed it:

The Church in Saxony was dominated by the civil power and the result of Luther's Reformation was the identification of the Church with territorial interests. It was an example par excellence of what the Roman Church had tried to avoid since the time of Charlemagne and the Saxon Emperors. By enforcing the celibacy of the clergy the medieval Church had waged ceaseless warfare against the identification of ecclesiastical with territorial interests, but this very identification became the basis of the Lutheran Church.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Cyril C. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

## *Luther and Secular Authority*

AS WE approach Luther's conception of the state we notice that here, too, as also regarding his view of the church, the most contradictory interpretations have been advanced by various scholars. To some, the bold monk of Wittenberg appears as the herald of European freedom. Goethe, Fichte, and a host of Lutheran scholars have tended to this view. To others, Luther is the forerunner of Hegel and totalitarian fascism. Lord Acton held that Luther really hated liberty. He said: "The notion of liberty, whether civil or religious, was hateful to his despotic nature, and contrary to his interpretation of Scripture."<sup>1</sup> According to the late Professor Neve, an American Lutheran scholar, "the separation between Church and State belongs to the most significant steps of the Lutheran Reformation."<sup>2</sup> Figgis, on the other hand, in his Birbeck Lectures delivered in Trinity College, Cambridge, England, in 1900, maintained that "Luther, in fact, refuses to make that sharp distinction of sacred and secular so characteristic of the Latin world; and paves the way for the exalted theory of the State entertained by Hegel and his followers."<sup>3</sup> Elert, a contemporary Lutheran scholar of Germany, denies that Luther held the idea of the "pure authoritarian State" and that the reformer, in distinguishing between bad and good government, injected "by this differentiating ethical evaluation of the concrete conditions of the State . . . the starting point toward the critique of the State."<sup>4</sup> McGovern, an American historian, connects Martin Luther closely with the development of statism and present day fascist

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<sup>1</sup> *History of Freedom*, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Churches and Sects of Christendom*, p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> *From Gerson to Grotius*, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Morphologie des Luthertums*, II, 296.



ideology. He sums up Luther's doctrine in these paradoxical statements:

Luther started with a plea for reform in the concept of the Church and ended with a reform in the concept of the State. He started with a plea for individual liberty and for freedom of conscience; yet his doctrines led directly to a belief in the divine right of kings and to the belief that monarchs have a right to dictate religious dogmas to the private individual. He started as an internationalist with a message to the peoples of all nations; he ended by formulating the doctrine of all powerful national states in perpetual antagonism to one another. He started with the doctrine of the basic equality of all men, and ended with the doctrine that all men should be subject to the iron will of their secular rulers.<sup>5</sup>

Some scholars like Ernst Troeltsch have maintained that, basically, Luther still belonged to the Middle Ages and that Luther's view of society and the state was, in its main outline, a variation of the sociology of medieval Latin Catholicism.<sup>6</sup> Karl Müller, siding with Sohm, held that Luther stood firmly on the ground of the medieval view of the *corpus christianum*, though he conceived its intrinsic nature differently from the old interpreters.<sup>7</sup> Hans von Schubert, on the other hand, has defended the thesis that the ideas of Luther's *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* represented "the conceptual and fundamental dissolution of the uniform 'Christian Society' in which State and Church are but two different aspects or, better still, only two different ways of considering the same matter."<sup>8</sup>

With von Schubert side Henry Tode and G. von Below. The latter has written: "It was Luther who accomplished the true deliverance of the State; he achieved it by removing the differentiation between ecclesiastically good works and worldly activities and by limiting religion and the Church to their proper sphere."<sup>9</sup> This same author also declared: "Considered by itself the Reformation also signifies the negation of the universal empire of the

<sup>5</sup> *From Luther to Hitler*, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus fuer die Entstehung der modernen Welt*, p. 16 ff.

<sup>7</sup> *Kirche, Gemeinde und Obrigkeit nach Luther*, pp. 6, 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Die weltgeschichtliche Bedeutung der Reformation* (Festrede), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Die Bedeutung der Reformation fuer die politische Entwicklung*, p. 8.

Middle Ages."<sup>10</sup> Tode goes even a step farther when he says: "The decision which lay in the final elimination of all claims of sovereignty of the Church over the State was the victory of the modern State whose sovereignty could already be proclaimed at the end of the sixteenth century. Luther brought about this decision."<sup>11</sup>

Thus the opinions and interpretations vary according to the peculiar viewpoint of each author. It is no wonder, then, that a recent author, Nils Ehrenstroem, could say: "In spite of the fact that all schools of thought make a common appeal to the principles of the Lutheran Reformation, there is *no* consensus on the question of what actually constitutes the genuine Lutheran conception of the State."<sup>12</sup> This author is perhaps right in suggesting that it is more a negative element of truth "in this [Lutheranism's] moral scepticism in the political sphere, namely, that the ethical obligations of political life cannot be laid down and fixed once for all in a universally applicable system."<sup>13</sup>

As we present, therefore, our investigation of Luther's view of the state we shall try to keep in mind these divergent interpretations that have been put forth in recent scholarship and to check them by a careful study of the sources in order to discover whether these divergent interpretations of Luther's views are traceable to his own thinking or to the results of the prejudicial ideas of modern historians, or whether they are properly attributable to both.

Cyril C. Richardson has divided Luther's political activity into four distinct periods. These periods, he argues, like all historical periods, are not distinguished by clear edges but rather by rising peaks of climax. During the first phase, Luther was a political optimist, and he believed that Germany's social and religious plight might be remedied by an appeal to the emperor. His *Address to the Christian Nobility* of 1520 is expressive of this optimism. During the second phase, Luther's earlier optimism is followed by disillusionment. Having been declared an outcaste by the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther now tends to separate the church sharply

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Luther und die deutsche Kultur*, (Münchener Luther Ausgabe), I, ii.

<sup>12</sup> *Christian Faith and the Modern State*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

from all involvements with secular powers. His *Concerning Secular Authority* of 1523 articulates the mood of the reformer in this period. Here, passive obedience in worldly matters and non-resistance to force are the major emphases. The third phase is shaped by the contingencies of history. The compulsion of God is the final justification of war and of rebellion against the emperor. Luther's writings during the period of the Schmalcaldic League evidence this position. The fourth and, as Richardson has well put it, "the fatal climax of this position is realized in the final sanctification of political power, which marked the last period of Luther's life."<sup>14</sup> This appraisal coincides with the judgment of men like Ernst Troeltsch, Baumgarten, and others. Conrad Ferdinand Meyer was not far wrong when he said of Luther: "His spirit was the battleground of two ages."

#### I. LUTHER'S BOAST REGARDING HIS KNOWLEDGE OF SECULAR POWER (*Obrigkeit*)

Luther's writings attest a confidence that he had discovered a new meaning of secular authority. He boasts of this again and again. In 1526 he wrote: "For I make bold to say that since the days of the Apostles no one has so clearly and gloriously described and praised the affairs of secular authority as I have. Even my enemies must admit that . . ." <sup>15</sup> A similar passage may be found in his tract on the war against the Turks, written in 1529.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, as a recent writer has warned, it must be remembered that Luther always spoke as a theologian and not as a political scientist. When, for instance, the Saxon Court sought his advice on technical legal matters bearing on the status of the emperor, Luther informed the Elector that he was no authority in political matters. Such problems, he avowed, the jurist had to decide. Again, the six political treatises which Luther wrote were all addressed to some specific problem that arose out of the concrete political situation of the times.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>15</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XLX, 626.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, XXX, II, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Ernest G. Schwiebert, "The Medieval Pattern in Luther's Views of the State," *Church History*, XII (June, 1943), No. 2, 107.



## II. THE *Obrigkeits* AND ITS ORDER ARE DIVINELY GROUNDED

Contrary to much teaching of the day that secular authority is a "pagan, human, ungodly thing," Luther taught that "the secular estate is a divine order which every person is bound to obey and honor."<sup>18</sup> Not only popes, bishops, priests, or monastics belong to the spiritual estate, but with equal justice we may speak of princes, lords, craftsmen, or farmers as being spiritual, since all Christians are truly spiritual with no basic difference existing between them as to their calling of *station* (*Stand*). Only as God has given men various ministries to perform, according to 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26, do they differ as to their office (*Amt*).

As one analyzes Luther's predicates which he applies to the divinely given *Obrigkeits* one is struck by their cumulative effect. Luther not only speaks of the office of the magistrate as a divine gift,<sup>19</sup> but secular authority and other orders of creation, such as matrimony, are divine in themselves.<sup>20</sup> Man's place within these orders is divinely ordered: <sup>21</sup> "a godly and good work which indeed pleases God." <sup>22</sup> These orders are not only divine, they are also holy.<sup>23</sup> On the basis of Psalm 82 Luther speaks of secular rulers as gods, while their virtues "are not only angelic but divine virtues."<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the reformer points out that the Fourth Commandment, which is the basis of secular orders, follows immediately after those Commandments that speak of God's own honor.<sup>25</sup>

The supreme proof in Luther's own thinking that these secular orders are of God is found in the bitter and relentless fight which Satan wages against them. The prince of this world fights whatever God has ordered, be it the rightful rule of those in authority, or the peace that humans would enjoy, or holy matrimony, or the

<sup>18</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XXXI, 190.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 105.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXXII, 314.

<sup>21</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, X, II, 276.

<sup>23</sup> *Op. cit.*, X, II, 297.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXXII, I, 198.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.*, XII, 241.

schools and "even the secular authority of the heathens."<sup>26</sup> One of the devil's tricks, moreover, is the insinuation of a higher morality that is attainable through celibacy. His onslaught against the married estate is proof of its divinity.

Since the secular orders, then, are God-given and God-ordained, it follows that man must be obedient to them. The Fourth Commandment sums up man's obedience towards the powers that be: "This Fourth Commandment also implies all sorts of obedience toward superiors who are in a position to command and rule. For parental authority is the source of all other authority."<sup>27</sup>

This grounding of man's obedience towards worldly authority in God's ultimate sovereignty makes for an unconditional obedience. Our obedience, to be sure, is towards "lords, wives, masters and their wives, as St. Paul tells us in Titus 2: 4."<sup>28</sup> However, since the position of those who require this obedience depends upon the *ordinaria potestas Dei*, it is really God himself who requires such obedience. Thus, God commands us to obey through the organs of the worldly magistrate. Luther can therefore say: "If a judge functions in his office and condemns an evildoer to death, it is not his work, but God's office and work which he carries out."<sup>29</sup> In his commentary on Genesis, Luther teaches that the magistrate does not act and speak *in sua persona, sed Dei*. Holy Writ calls the judgment of God the *iudicia per homines*.<sup>30</sup>

To Luther, then, every act of obedience of a citizen towards his ruler—be he monarch or president—implies a definite relationship towards God. It is God who, in all the mediaries of parents and earthly rulers, demands obedience of us. It is, furthermore, in and through these orders that God's presence in the world is realized. In the final analysis it is through the Word of God that these orders of creation have come into being. It is through God's Word that a man holds an office (*Amt*). A genuine *Amt* is of divine right. That is true for the office of a father, a husband, a princely ruler, or a minister of the gospel. Satan, the foe of all order, at-

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, LI, 245.

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXX, I, 152.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, VI, 263.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXXII, 324.

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, XLII, 129.

tacks all these orders and the ones who occupy them. He tempts by trying to rob men of the assurance that God's call (*vocatio*) to them is real and genuine.

We conclude this section by another significant utterance of the reformer:

But the Kingdom of the world is nothing else than the servant of God's wrath upon the wicked, and is a real precursor of hell and everlasting death. It should not be merciful but strict, severe, and wrathful in the fulfillment of its work and duty. Its tool is not a wreath of roses or a flower of love, but a naked sword, and a sword is a symbol of wrath, severity and punishment. It is turned only against the wicked, to hold these in check and keep them at peace, and to protect and save the righteous.<sup>31</sup>

### III. THE EXTENT OF THE AUTHORITY OF SECULAR RULERS

There can be no doubt that Luther consistently taught that the *Obrigkeit* is strictly a worldly order concerned only with temporal matters. He wrote in his "On Secular Authority":

The worldly power exercises laws which extend no farther than to life and property and such external matters on earth. For over the soul God can and will let no one rule but Himself. Therefore, where temporal power presumes to legislate for the soul, it usurps God's government and only seduces and destroys men's souls. We desire to make this so patently clear that every one can understand it, and that our Junkers, princes and bishops may see what fools they are when they seek to coerce people with their laws and mockery into believing thus or so.<sup>32</sup>

Nothing indeed could be clearer than this description of the extent of secular rule. Government is to preserve order, protect property, execute the laws of the land, look after the poor, punish the wicked, and thus make possible an ordered life in society. The idea that secular authority has the duty to enforce the laws in order to curb human desire and passion and to erect a dam against human caprice and arbitrariness, Luther held in common with

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<sup>31</sup> "An Open Letter Concerning the Hard Book Against the Peasants," *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia ed.) IV, 266.

<sup>32</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XI, 262.



thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the medieval scholastics.<sup>33</sup>

In the matters of the soul, then, the *Obrigkeits* has no competence. Yet, since Christians will always be a minority in this world, they are ever in need of the protection of secular authority against the wiles of the strong and the wicked. Therefore Luther says: "The world and the multitude is and remains un-Christian though they all be baptized and called Christians. But the true Christians dwell (as they say) far from one another and hence it will not do that one Christian government be in control over the whole world, or even over a single country or large groups of people. For there are always more wicked people than pious folk."<sup>34</sup>

Luther considers it illusory to want to rule a whole country with the gospel. That would be like a shepherd trying to have within the same stable sheep, wolves, lions, eagles, and like animals. The sheep would indeed keep the peace, but their life would soon be cut off, nor would the other animals remain at peace for long. Hence, *Obrigkeits* is absolutely necessary if human wickedness and sin are not to get out of bounds altogether. "For since we do not all believe, but the large masses are unbelieving, God has so ordered things, lest the world devour itself and that those in authority carry the sword to resist evildoers."<sup>35</sup>

In view of this attitude, Holl is perhaps right that Luther did not hold the idea of a Christian state anymore than that he defended the idea of a Christian shoemaker's craft. The kingdom of God to which all true children of God belong is alone the eternal kingdom. Two passages might illustrate, in this connection, how Luther related the kingdom of God to the kingdoms of earth:

Likewise also secular government may be called God's Kingdom. For he wills that it continue and that we be obedient to it. But it is only the Kingdom of the left hand. His rightful kingdom where He himself rules and where he appoints neither father nor mother, emperor nor king, henchman nor policeman, but where He is himself the Lord is this: where the Gospel is being preached to the poor.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Bohatec, *Calvins Lehre vom Staat und Kirche*, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XI, 251.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 329.

<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.*, LII, 26.

More specifically, Luther speaks of the kingdom of God in this vein:

Again, the Kingdom of Christ has nothing to do with external matters; it leaves such things unchanged as they are and it moves within its orders. For Christ commands that they shall preach the Gospel to every creature; the creatures exist prior to the Gospel, that is, all worldly matters and orders which are conceived by men's reason and implanted by God in terms of natural wisdom, which even St. Peter calls human creatures (I Pet. 2: 13), yet which are also called God's orders as in Romans 13: 2.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, while Luther enjoins strictest obedience to the orders of secular authority (as also to all other orders such as matrimony, parents, teachers) as being divinely ordained, he does not, as some have maintained—we are thinking of Figgis and others—exalt civil power over spiritual authorities. How else could he have spoken of the worldly realm as “the kingdom of the left hand?” Nor is the state, to him, an end in itself as Machiavelli had taught and as some modern nations assume and practice! True it is that Luther taught that as the *Obrigkei*t wields the sword against the wicked it becomes a tool of God's wrath. But God's wrath is not an end in itself either but rather and ultimately a means of God's mercy. Rightly has Karl Holl asserted against Ernst Troeltsch, who has put Luther alongside of Machiavelli:

For the State actually practices love to the extent that it protects the oppressed, the weak and the helpless. This insight helps Luther to see the power which the State exercises in the proper light. This power is not an end in itself. It is nothing but a gross misunderstanding to have accused Luther as having glorified “power for the sake of power.” The exercise of power by the State is to Luther no more an end in itself than is the wrath of God an end in itself. It receives its limitation and authentication through the love in whose service this power of the State is exercised.<sup>38</sup>

Holl is here defending the reformer of Wittenberg against Troeltsch whom he accuses of “bad taste” in his attempt to establish a connection between Machiavelli and Luther. Nor has

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXX, II, 562. Also note Luther's statement that *regnum regis Christi in charitate et mutua suorum dilectione*. See *Weimar Ausgabe*, III, 386.

<sup>38</sup> *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, I, 255-256.

Troeltsch been able to adduce real and convincing proof for his assertions. Speaking of the contemporary situation, Luther might well have denounced the arbitrary regimes of modern dictators like Hitler or Stalin, for he wrote: "It is therefore necessary that men rule not merely with power but also with reason. For pure power without reason cannot long endure and keeps the subjects in perpetual hatred against the government, as all history loudly attests."<sup>39</sup>

This attitude on the part of Luther explains why he felt no hesitancy in endorsing war, provided such a war was unmistakably a war of defense. But war, Luther held, must also be rooted in law, that is, in the right of a people or nation to its own way of life, in the right to defend one's home and hearth. Such war is to Luther essentially a labor of love towards those nearest to us. Hence, war once begun must be carried through with firm resolution. Luther can ask: "What is war but the punishing of wrong and evil? Why do people war if not for the purpose of securing peace and obedience?"<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XIX, 440.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 625.



## *Luther and the Problem of Natural Law*

WE COME at this point to one of the most crucial issues of contemporary theology. The conflict between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth is symptomatic of the cruciality of this problem. With regard to Martin Luther and his use of natural law for the motivation of his political ideas, we are confronted by a variety of judgments on the part of eminent scholars. The names of Karl Holl and Ernst Troeltsch come readily to mind as holding diametrically opposed ideas with regard to their interpretation of Luther's views on the matter. Holl, for instance, has asserted that both Troeltsch and Max Weber have carried the whole concept of natural law into Luther's thought.<sup>1</sup> Franz Lau, on the other hand, criticizes Holl for not having, first of all, considered more seriously the findings of Eugene Ehrhardt who, in 1901, wrote an article entitled "La notion du droit naturel chez Luther."<sup>2</sup> In the article, this scholar tried to show that, with Luther, the natural law is the source of all positive law, even of all secular norms—hence, also, of morality—while the gospel and the kingdom of Christ are purely spiritual.

It will become evident in our analysis that Lau's critique of Holl's position is more than justified. That Luther, as Holl has claimed, used the idea of natural law in various ways, cannot be denied. But to say flatly that the idea of the *lex naturae* is not at all to be found in the reformer's writings is contrary to the facts.

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<sup>1</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, I, 243-244.

<sup>2</sup> Ehrhardt, *Études de théologie et d'histoire*, publiées par MM. les professeurs de la faculté protestante de Paris en hommage à la faculté de théologie de Montauban, Paris, 1901.

Again, as one compares Holl's remarks on this issue in the several editions of his Luther book, one may notice that he, too, was forced to modify somewhat his former position.<sup>3</sup>

## I. THE DIVINE, POSITIVE, AND MOSAIC LAWS

From our discussion thus far it must be clear that, to Luther, the idea of natural law is intimately bound up with his belief in the living God. Luther, in accordance with Romans 2: 15, knows of a "certain natural knowledge implanted in their minds, by which they are naturally aware that what one wants to have done to himself should be done to another." (This and like ideas, which we call the law of nature, are the basis of human law and of all good works.)<sup>4</sup> The very fact that Luther finds the knowledge of this law attested in Holy Writ points to his belief that it is a God-given law. This *lex naturae*, Luther held, underlies the orders of society, such as matrimony, parental authority, secular rule, and the like. The natural law is essentially or, to put it still better, originally an unwritten law. As such it is related to the *ius divinum*, the divine law. The *ius naturale*, as God's eternal law, is imprinted in our conscience by God, and this imprinting produces the *lex naturae* by which men everywhere may basically know as to what is right or wrong.

Luther taught that positive law (*ius positivum*) is a conditioned law, subject to the changing mores and circumstances of historical development. Hence, *tempora mutant leges et mores*.<sup>5</sup> Natural law, being that which underlies all positive law, is the determining principle of law; therefore, it is unchangeable. But the form of law by which the laws of one country differ from those of another country is ever changing. Positive law, therefore, may be bad law, wherefore it may become necessary to criticize it publicly. That

<sup>3</sup> Lau, " 'Ausserliche Ordnung' und 'Weltlich Ding,'" *Luthers Theologie*, p. 35. Also see Otto Piper "What is Natural Law," *Theology Today* (January, 1946) II, 459-471. Extremely well written, giving an historical review of the problem from the Greeks, through Eastern Christianity, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the reformers, and the current controversy.

<sup>4</sup> John T. McNeill "Natural Law in the Thought of Luther," *Church History*, (September, 1941) p. 223.

<sup>5</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XLIII, 355; L, 616.

Luther made frequent use of this right of criticism of the execution of positive law is evident from his writings, especially as one gleans his extensive correspondence with the princes of his time.

Ehrhardt has excellently formulated Luther's understanding of the interrelationship between natural and positive law when he says "Luther never identified the natural law with any existing legislative system. To him the natural law is a very concrete ideal which serves him as an instrument of criticism and reform."<sup>6</sup> In other words, to the Wittenberg reformer all existing legislation is in the form of positive law, which as such is binding only on those who are subject to it, while natural law is binding on all men. However, lest there be misunderstanding at this point, it needs to be emphasized here that to Luther even positive law has its ultimate sanction from God and, although it is subject to being abrogated, modified or entirely dispensed with, it is nevertheless binding since all obedience, as we have shown above, is obedience which men render unto God.

The Mosaic law (*lex mosaica*) is to Luther a form of positive law, "bound to a special form, person, time and cities."<sup>7</sup> Though this law is ordained of God and reflects or "incorporates the law of nature which is also the source of the other national laws,"<sup>8</sup> it is by no means absolute law. For natural law in Luther's thinking can never be fully and absolutely expressed in any system of positive law. This explains why he can call the Decalogue the quintessence of the Mosaic law, the *Sachsenspiegel der Juden*, and why he can write: "Therefore let Moses be to the Jews what the Saxon Mirror is to us; we of the Gentiles have nothing to do with it any longer. By the same token the French pay no heed to our Saxon Mirror, yet in matters of natural law they do agree with us."<sup>9</sup>

Luther could take this position despite the fact that he thought very highly of the Mosaic law. In fact, over against the exaggerated esteem with which the humanists of his day held the Roman law, Luther discovered many things in the Mosaic law which made him prefer it to the Roman law. The latter, for instance, made

<sup>6</sup> Ehrhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXX, I, 144.

<sup>8</sup> McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

<sup>9</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XVIII, 81.



more of property rights than of the rights of persons, a fact which was obnoxious to the reformer.

## II. EQUITY AND REASON

Our English word "equity" is best rendered with "fairness." In law, this term is often used as synonymous with natural justice in contradistinction to the fixed and technical rules of the law. In its technical sense "the term equity signifies the system of jurisprudence originated and applied by the English Court of Chancery."<sup>10</sup> The Court of Chancery acts *in personam*, while the courts of common law act *in rem*. In other words, equity jurisprudence aimed at mitigating the rigor of the common law system by preventing the inequitable application of rules of law and by affording a remedy when there was no remedy at law, or where the legal remedy was inadequate. To this type of jurisprudence belong such matters as bill of peace, bill of interpleader, subrogation, and so on. Back of this lay a long tradition from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas. It was but natural that Luther should have made use of this idea for his purpose. Many passages in his works indicate how Luther constantly fought against the *ius strictum*, that is, the strict letter of the law and its enforcement. We list a few of the passages that bear on the employment of the law of equity (*Billigkeit-aequitas*) in the administration of justice:

The strict law is often the greatest injustice.<sup>11</sup>

Charitas quae moderatur omnes leges tam ceremoniales quam phanas.<sup>12</sup>

It is needful to moderate and soften the sternness of justice.<sup>13</sup>

For this reason judges and lords must exercise wisdom and discretion and reasonably apply the law of equity, and let the law take its course, or set it aside, accordingly.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *The New International Encyclopaedia* (2d ed.), VIII, 47-48.

<sup>11</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, XXX, III, 223.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV, 714. (Next to faith, it is charity which moderates all laws, ceremonies as well as secular matters.)

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, X, III, 255.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, XIX, 632.

Holl has judiciously reminded us that while Luther withheld his judgment with regard to the technical aspects of law, he always stressed the personal element in the administration of justice. His concern for equity in law derived from his concern for the living, actual persons with whom law and order, represented by secular authority, have to do. This sense of equity is rarely found in the tomes of the jurists, but it may be found in men of wise understanding. This leads us to the consideration of reason and its relation to the natural law.

We have already noticed that, with Luther, equity and reasonableness must go hand in hand. Luther, while fully aware of the limitations and corruptions of man's reason, was clearly convinced that in worldly matters such as secular government reason is competent to function. He can, therefore, speak of wisdom as the "empress of worldly rule."<sup>15</sup>

The sphere of action of man's reason is limited to the things of earth, that is, to matters of civil, economic, and political purport.<sup>16</sup> Rulers, whether kings, judges, magistrates or the humblest village official, whether fathers or teachers, are enjoined by both God and reason to be fair in their dealings with those whom they govern, protect, teach, or admonish. To judge or govern equitably meant to Luther to act according to the course of nature, not merely *legibus*, i.e., according to the strict letter of the law.<sup>17</sup> In other words, all natural orders are subject to the natural law, which is a law of reason and reasonableness. Law, therefore, is never a mere abstraction, but something concrete, real and personal, and hence it must be administered on the highest personal level, that is, reasonably.

In the light of these views, Luther bitterly complained about the severity of both Roman and Germanic law which in his day protected property more than the interests of people or persons. Wrote the reformer: "Theft is the least of sins before God, since it affects only temporal goods; but the world punishes it the hardest. Yet adultery is much more grievous, but that remains unpunished in the world. Then comes murder: it is, however, honourable

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXVIII, 527.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, XLIII, 106; XLII, 138.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, VI, 6, 554.

in the eyes of men, if a person strike but boldly and maliciously.”<sup>18</sup> If Luther were alive today and witnessed our “sensate civilization,” as Sorokin of Harvard has called it, what indictments might he not hurl at *our* twisted sense of justice in many areas of modern life?

Luther’s view of equity in the administration of justice is predicated on his view of man as a creature made into the image of God. Man is a rational soul, wherefore the need of the use of reason on the part of those who would rule wisely and justly. In Gospel language this means that “man is not made for the sabbath, but sabbath for man.” This makes for a certain freedom on the part of the reformer with regard to the form of government that may obtain in a given country. Lutherans have proved through their history that they can live under a monarchy as well as a democracy. Luther’s concern was primarily with persons and not with some absolutized orders, for “antquam leges ferantur, requirendas sunt personae, qui regnant et regentur, alioqui vanae sunt.”<sup>19</sup>

### III. CAN POSITIVE AND WRITTEN LAW BE CHANGED?

It is well known that Luther was a rather conservative person, being averse to any radical changes of existing conditions whether of church or state. His attitude towards the peasants’ rebellion has brought down upon the reformer the charge that he had sold out to the princes and to the right of brute power. Men like the Jesuit scholar Grisar or Hugo Ball have made Luther responsible for the destruction of the unity of Europe and the power politics of Prussia. Yet, Luther, as early as 1520, allowed the possibility of political change in exceptional circumstances. How shall we explain his basic attitude in these matters?

With Thomas Carlyle, Luther held the view that history is at bottom the history of its great men. The men of extraordinary power or genius like Alexander the Great, Scipio Africanus or the Emperor Augustus possessed a *singularis Dei vocatio*,<sup>20</sup> and again and again such men have turned the tides of history. The Old Testament judges, Luther felt, also belonged in this category.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, XII, 243.

<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.*, XIV, 549.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, XLIII, 641; 643.



These heroes are not subject to the ordinary rules of human behavior. Nor are ordinary mortals to presume that they may imitate such leaders.

Luther, moreover, warns against discussing the possibilities of the emergence of such heroes in history. When they appear at any historic moment their actuality is sufficient proof of their validity.

It may be observed at this juncture that during the struggle of the Confessional Church in Germany not only the so-called German or Nazi Christians but even Karl Barth used a similar type of reasoning in order to explain the phenomenon of the *Führer*. On the basis of that argumentation, Barth ridiculed the idea of the much-debated *Führer-Prinzip* or leadership principle which the German Christians tried to carry through within the German church.<sup>21</sup>

We see, then, in Luther's thinking, two strains side by side: the ethics of obedience and the ethics of the man of destiny. It is, as Lau has well said, erroneous to conclude that Luther held a static view of the orders that govern man's external existence. Lau has expressed it thus:

The orders are to Luther something highly dynamic; they are institutions which the heroes of history constantly break to pieces and then rebuild. In this work the mob is excluded. Luther conceives the renewal of the orders in terms of the *lex naturae* to take place dramatically and on a world-historic plane, in the form of an event, in sharp contrast to the idea of bourgeois ethics.<sup>22</sup>

To understand more fully Luther's views on this matter it would be necessary to analyze in detail his view of history. Suffice it to say here that the reformer's view of history, like that of Calvin, is thoroughly theocentric in focus and tendency. God's *Allwirksamkeit* or his omnipresent and all-pervasive activity is, to Luther, an indubitable fact, but this fact is only known to him who walks by faith. God is the Lord of the natural foundations of history, since he is the creator of all things. "We can neither move a finger nor think a single thought without God empowering us."<sup>23</sup> It is God

<sup>21</sup> *Theologische Existenz Heute*, July, 1933, Heft 1.

<sup>22</sup> Lau, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>23</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe* I, 649.

who has founded nations and empires, and by his judgments they also come to nought.

The ups and downs of history and of nations are in God's hand. Luther can call this a *Spiel Gottes*<sup>24</sup> (God's play). Yet men are held fully responsible and must be active, for they are not mere puppets. Man stands not only in natural and biological relations but also in historical connections, wherefore he is a responsible agent in history. The decisive character of history, Luther held, lies in man's confrontation with the orders and with his neighbors.

The cruciality of history is brought on by God's adversary Satan, who is unceasingly busy to frustrate God's designs. Thus history becomes a battleground of conflicting forces. Because of this conflict history is the self-veiling of God. This fact explains the manner in which God rules the world, for he rules it not directly but indirectly. Were God to rule directly, man would utterly perish. He could not endure such direct rule of God. But God establishes orders and rulers whom Luther occasionally refers to as "God's masks" or *larvae*. Because of these orders man must act; he cannot remain a mere spectator in the drama of history.

Where the church is affected in this conflict between God and Satan, other rules obtain than are operative in the world. It is the duty of the church to live under the cross. For this reason, it can never have a part in open rebellion against the God-appointed orders of secular rule. Instead, persecution is a divinely willed feature of the church's life on earth in every epoch of history. Only after Christ's return will the church become a church of glory. Until that time, its life is hidden with Christ in God. In things temporal it is subject to the orders of time, while in things spiritual it is subservient only to God. What about the possibility of resistance to secular authority? Is it entirely excluded in Luther's thinking?

A number of competent writers have shown that during part of his career Luther rejected any suggestion of making war on the emperor. The evangelical princes, with Landgraf Philip of Hesse as chief spokesman, dreamed of a strong Protestant league extending from Bern to Denmark, including German, French and Vene-

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<sup>24</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe* VII, 590.

tian evangelical princes, with which they might overthrow the Catholic emperor and the House of Hapsburg. Zwingli, in turn, held that both the pope, the usurper, and his counterpart, the Catholic emperor, ought to be fought and removed from power. Luther, however, when the rulers of Saxony and Hesse appealed to him for advice, counseled against any forcible resistance to God's anointed emperor. Between May, 1529, and the end of 1530, Luther exchanged a number of letters with his own sovereign, Elector John, in which, on the basis of God's Word, he tried to justify his position. This, despite the fact that the emperor might have sought to suppress Protestantism by means of arms. Only toward the end of this controversy did Luther yield to the jurists who at last convinced him that resistance to the emperor was possible and permissible on the basis of the positive law of the realm. But this resistance, Luther maintained, was not for the common man but rather for the estates of the empire. The princes in their representative character may, under certain circumstances, resist or depose the emperor, particularly if the latter should want to force the Catholic faith upon his Protestant subjects. For the emperor, any more than any other secular ruler, had no jurisdiction over men's souls and consciences.

But, as Georg Merz has shown, it was not from his understanding of the gospel but rather from his understanding of the meaning of *Obrigkeit* that Luther yielded to the plea for resistance against the emperor.<sup>25</sup> For the emperor did not lose the claim to unconditional obedience because he was a Catholic, but because he might surrender his own sovereignty by yielding to papal claims and pressures.

#### IV. THE ABUSE OF POWER BY SECULAR RULERS

That secular and spiritual rulers constantly abuse their authority is a fact which Luther mentions again and again. While, as we have shown before, Luther cannot speak too highly of the divine predicates of secular rulers, he has a keen eye for their faults and flaws, both past and present. Consider the reformer's appraisal

<sup>25</sup> Georg Merz, "Glaube und Politik im Handeln Luthers," *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 11. Jahrgang, Heft 3 (1933). Cf. Schwiebert, *op. cit.*



of the matter in the following words: "The office of both princes and officials is divine and proper, but those who hold such offices are mostly of the devil."<sup>26</sup>

As the reformer peruses the pages of history he becomes convinced that seldom did empires come into being without resorting to robbery and injustice. On this point Luther sides with Augustine. Yet he does not think for a moment to discount secular authority because of its abuses. Here, as in his interpretation of law and its administration, Luther accentuated the fact that it is not *Obrigkeit* as such but rather the *persons* occupying positions of rulership who tend to abuse their powers. He can, therefore, write with regard to empires that have persecuted the church: "Kingdoms and governments as such have not persecuted Christ, but the persons who were holding power, have at times been evil."<sup>27</sup>

Abuse of power is never justified. However, God at times permits evil rulers to have their way in order to punish his people for their sins. While Luther sternly rejects the right of a people to rise up against wicked rulers, warning Christians in particular never to become involved in rebellion, he most emphatically teaches that God will sooner or later judge all evil rulers.

The highest form of abuse of secular authority, to Luther, is the presumption no longer to function as the servant of God's justice and wrath but to rule tyrannically or to presume to the crown rights of God himself. Such presumptive pride which defies man is the height of sin. It is, therefore, stark unbelief for anyone to put his ultimate trust in princes. The Christian, as Luther teaches in his *Great Catechism*, is to make use of all earthly goods, but "only for the sake of temporal satisfactions and within his God ordained estate and no one dare allow these temporal matters to become his Lord or idol."<sup>28</sup> But in that same *Catechism*, Luther reiterates that "the abuse does not abolish but confirms the substance."<sup>29</sup> Hence, obedience is to be rendered even to abusive rulers. However, Luther does allow for refusal of obedience where rulers clearly

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<sup>26</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, LI, 254.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, XXX, II, 172.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXX, I, 139.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, 219.

violate God's law, that is, when they try to coerce men to act against the first three Commandments. The emperor, for instance, is not to be obeyed should he call us to war against the blessings of the gospel.<sup>30</sup> But even in that situation where Christians must be disobedient to secular authority they do not cease to reverence that authority. Luther even goes so far as to say that in the event a ruler might force one to deny Christ he would still remain that person's rightful ruler. Whatever disobedience may be called for, it cannot be anything but passive non-resistance. As Luther puts it in his tract *Concerning Secular Authority*, "We are not to resist the *Obrigkeit* with force, but only with our confession of the truth. If it accepts our witness, well and good, if it rejects it you are excused and you then suffer wrong for God's sake."<sup>31</sup>

It must be clear from the general trend of this discussion of Luther's view of secular authority and of the natural law that is to operate in its affairs, that he never loses sight of the fact of sin in man's life. Secular authority is necessary because of the evil in the world. The orders are a dam against outbreking sin. They are, paradoxically speaking, both a curse and a blessing. And it is God who, through these orders, administers damnation and salvation, mortification and vivification.<sup>32</sup>

Luther sees the involvement of the world and its orders in the bondage of sin so strongly and so vividly that he can speak of "the rule of the world . . . continuing the rule of Satan."<sup>33</sup> Occasionally, he even labels it a *regnum peccati*.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the reformer was convinced that the orders were originally good, but they have become infected with evil because of the fall of man. For the natural law (*lex naturae*) is, as it were, a law above the world, being ultimately derived from that Word of God which, according to Romans 1, is written into the hearts of men. Luther, therefore, could think of all rightful work or of matrimony as having been instituted for man's good prior to the fall. Now, however, all these orders, including that of secular rule, have become

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, XXX, II, 197.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, XI, 277.

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, XLII, 645.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, XLIV, 647.

<sup>34</sup> *Op. cit.*, XLIII, 79.

affected by man's fall and are everywhere enmeshed in sin. No man can live in his present estate without sin, although that estate (*Stand*) is of God's own ordering.

## V. EQUALITY AND INEQUALITY AMONG MEN

In view of the tensions to which modern democratic ideas have been subjected in recent decades, this is a most important issue. A few passages from his writings may throw light on how Luther stands in this matter. In his *Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants* of 1525, Luther wrote: "For a worldly kingdom cannot stand unless there is in it inequality of persons, so that some are free, some imprisoned, some lords, some subjects, etc.; and St. Paul says in Galatians, that in Christ master and servant are one thing."<sup>35</sup>

If we ask: Why must this inequality prevail? Luther quickly answers, Because of sin and evil in the world! The strong would swallow the weak! The mighty destroy the poor! It is because of "our guilt that each one is the bonds slave of his neighbour."<sup>36</sup> It will not do for every one to usurp the authority of his superiors. This was one of Luther's chief arguments against the rebellious peasants. They were seeking the abolition of the intolerable burdens and injustices imposed upon them by their overlords. Luther did not for one moment deny that the peasants had a right to complain. He openly rebuked the princes and lords for their hardness of heart and their tyrannical rule over the peasants, and he threatened dire judgments to come upon them from the hand of God. Why, then, did Luther resist the peasants' cry for social and economic equality? As we carefully analyze the document we have already alluded to, the reasons were as follows: First, Luther adamantly rejected any suggestion on the part of the peasants to use the gospel as a means of creating a new social order by force.<sup>37</sup> Regarding the third article of the peasants, which said "There shall be no serfs, for Christ has made all men free"<sup>38</sup> Luther wrote:

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<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, XVIII, 326.

<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.*, VI, 411.

<sup>37</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, I, 250.

<sup>38</sup> *Works of Martin Luther*, IV, 240.



That is making Christian liberty an utterly carnal thing. Did not Abraham and other patriarchs and prophets have slaves? Read what St. Paul teaches about servants, who, at that time, were slaves. Therefore this article is dead against the Gospel. It is a piece of robbery by which every man takes from his lord the body, which has become his lord's property. For a slave can be a Christian, and have Christian liberty, in the same way that a prisoner or a sick man is a Christian, and yet not free. This article would make all men equal, and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly, external kingdom; and that is impossible.<sup>39</sup>

Another reason why Luther resisted the peasants was that they took the vindication of their just cause into their own hands. Worse than that, they foolishly and stubbornly identified their cause with the cause of Jesus Christ. That seemed to Luther a most outrageous folly and perversion of the gospel.

Did Luther, then, mean that such inequalities as the peasants groaned under and for which they sought redress must remain forever? That no changes were either possible or desirable? By no means! For Luther, as stated, did plead with the princes to mend their evil ways, to do justice to the demands of the peasants, lest they be stricken by the fury of the oppressed and the wrath of God Almighty. What he vigorously rejected was the presumption of men to seek justice, in the name of Christ, by means of violent rebellion. Not even Turks, Jews, or pagans ignore the "common, divine and natural law" without which there is no peace or order in the world. As Christians, the peasants should suffer, bear the cross, according to the spirit and the law of Christ! Luther wrote:

No matter how right you are, it is not for a Christian to appeal to law, or to fight, but rather to suffer wrong and endure evil; and there is no other way (I Corinthians VI). You yourselves confess in your Preface, that all who believe in Christ become kindly, peaceful, patient, and united; but in your deeds you are displaying nothing but impatience, turbulence, strife and violence; thus you contradict your words.<sup>40</sup>

It is, therefore, unjust to accuse Luther of having been a spineless flatterer of princes, a heartless man who, for the sake of his

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<sup>39</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 233.

own advantage, sided against the oppressed peasants and with the cruel tyrants of his day. Harold Grimm has well emphasized that Luther's paramount interest was religious and not political or social whenever he entered the area of contemporary social strife.<sup>41</sup> That he had a blind spot with regard to some of the social structures of his time need not be denied. Who, in any age, is so free of prejudice as to be absolutely objective and non-partisan? In Luther's thinking the inequalities of existence are solemn facts. They may be remedied, but changes must take place in orderly fashion and through appointed authorities.

However much we may be inclined to criticize Luther with regard to his attitude toward equality and inequality in the social order, we must try to understand the basic presuppositions of his thinking and allow for the sincerity of his position. The reformer considered the differentiation of men living in various estates (*Stände*) and following different vocations as a God-willed arrangement. In fact, as Holl has indicated,<sup>42</sup> Luther came to the conviction that the differentiation of society according to vocations contributed toward the realization of the law of love among men. From this vantage point, he also interpreted the problem of private property and of all rightful work. Over against the communistic tendencies of some of the radical sectarians of his day, Luther affirmed the right of private property for the Christian. Here again, he discovered a summons to practice Christ's law of love inasmuch as each disciple of Jesus is to be a faithful steward of his possessions. He must ever be willing, for Christ's sake and his neighbor's sake, to share what he has with his fellows. The very fact that Christ commands us to share and to give presupposes his endorsement of private property. Communism all too easily encourages greed and covetousness. It kills the love of work which Luther so much exalted. He insists that the principle of love *and* justice is to prevail in all human relations. Secular authority not only punishes and restrains, but it also serves, protects, and ministers on behalf of its subjects.

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<sup>41</sup> Harold J. Grimm, "Luther's Conception of Territorial and National Loyalty," *Church History*, XVII (June, 1948), 79-80.

<sup>42</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-260.

## *Luther and the Problem of Religious Liberty*

UNTIL the beginning of the nineteenth century it was generally believed that Luther had been a staunch defender of religious liberty. But a more exacting study of the sources has shaken this view severely. Even today, unanimity of opinion and interpretation has by no means been attained on this question. Some scholars like Boehmer and Troeltsch have tried to distinguish between the young and the old Luther, inferring that the reformer, in the early stages of his career, was definitely imbued with the lofty ideals of religious tolerance and freedom; but that, towards the end of his life or already soon after winning his first victories over the papacy, he came to espouse the current opinions with regard to religious liberty. Roland H. Bainton of Yale has well said:

By some it is contended that he [Luther] broke radically with an earlier liberalism. By none is a measure of change denied, but certain writers would minimize the change by insisting that Luther was essentially intolerant from the beginning, others by representing him as fundamentally tolerant to the end. Still others find him incurably inconsistent. They are all right and all wrong. Luther experienced a profound change, but he was not without a measure of inconsistency all along the line.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Holl, while recognizing that the establishment of the territorial system of church government entailed grievous consequences, enters the lists in defense of Luther on the side of freedom of conscience. For never, argues the late Berlin scholar, was a

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<sup>1</sup> Bainton, "The Development and Consistency of Luther's Attitude Toward Religious Liberty," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXII (1929), 107-108.



Catholic persecuted in Germany for the sake of his faith.<sup>2</sup> There was always the possibility, after the religious peace of Augsburg, that dissenters could emigrate to other regions where they might practice their faith unmolested by the authorities.

One may say that, between 1517 and 1525, Luther was more or less consistent in his advocacy of religious freedom. Between 1525 and 1530, he modified his erstwhile liberal attitude considerably, although he seems to have halted between two opinions in this period. After 1530, Luther fell victim, it seems, to a rather harsh and often merciless attitude towards dissenters, no matter whether they were Anabaptists, Zwinglians, or Calvinists. Towards the Jews Luther, in the latter part of his life, evidenced a tragically despicable mood of hatred and contempt.

In 1520 Luther reasoned that "if heretics were to be overcome with fire, the executioners would be the most learned doctors on earth. We need not study any longer, but he who could get the better of the other fellow might burn him up."<sup>3</sup> In this period, the reformer conceives heresy to be a spiritual matter, but it is not, as later on, equated with blasphemy. In his *On Secular Authority*, of the year 1523, Luther denied to the secular powers the right to deal with heresy by means of force. A year later, he still held that "they are not Christians who besides the Word resort to fists, be they filled to overflowing with ten Holy Ghosts."<sup>4</sup> Yet it was in that year that Carlstadt was driven from Wittenberg and Saxony, being charged with having disturbed the peace. With regard to Thomas Münzer, Luther wrote about the same time: "Your Princely Grace shall not restrain the office of the Word. Just let them confidently keep on preaching however much they like and against whom they wish, for there must of necessity be sects . . . Let the spirits clash and strive with one another."<sup>5</sup>

Over against the papal party which through the Inquisition had again and again summarily dealt with heretics, Luther proudly boasted that "we do not kill, banish and persecute anybody who teaches other than we do. For we fight with the Word of God

<sup>2</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, I, 485 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Weimar Ausgabe, VI, 455.

<sup>4</sup> Erlangen Ausgabe LIII, 265-268 (August, 1524).

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, VI, 455 ff.

alone. If they do not want our witness, we let them have their way, and separate ourselves from them and let them stick to any belief they like." <sup>6</sup>

As a consequence of the peasants' revolt Luther more and more surrendered this tolerant and broadminded attitude. While, in 1522, he had argued against the abomination of the Romish Mass without, however, pleading for its forceful elimination from the service. Luther began to modify his view on the matter after the death of his friend and patron Elector Frederick the Wise. Now, in 1525, writing to Spalatin, he argues in favor of the prince's suppression of eternal abominations, for "princes should prohibit public crimes such as perjury, manifest blasphemy of the name of God, and the like, without considering whether the culprits believe or not or whether they curse God in private." <sup>7</sup> By 1527 Luther already advocated the banishment of false prophets. In a letter to Link, he even played with the idea whether or not it might be advisable to allow the magistrates to kill false prophets, but the example of the papists and the Jews restrained him. Two years later, in 1529, the edict of Speyer commanded the Anabaptists to be put to death by fire or sword without previous ecclesiastical trial. Luther at first remained non-committal, but in March, 1530, he gave his consent to the death penalty for Anabaptists, since it was obvious that these dangerous fanatics were both blasphemers and seditionists. This was a logical sequence of Luther's hardening attitude towards the *Schwaermer*, for as early as 1528 he had caused the Elector John, his prince, to issue a strict order against all who dared to buy, sell, or read the books and tracts of the cursed Anabaptists and Sacramentarians.

That some of the reformers in Wittenberg had at first been impressed by the enthusiasm and scriptural knowledge of the sectarians may be gleaned from a remark which Melanchthon dropped in a letter to Myconius in 1530. The learned Melanchthon confessed in this letter that when he first made the acquaintance of Storch and Stübner, the Zwickau prophets who visited Wittenberg towards the end of December, 1521, he had yielded

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<sup>6</sup> *Weimer Ausgabe*, XIX, 263 (April, 1526).

<sup>7</sup> *Erlangen Ausgabe*, V, 271 (November 11, 1525).

to a foolish attitude of clemency. It was particularly Stübner's skill in handling the Scriptures that had both impressed and discomfited the young and inexperienced scholar. Meanwhile, he had a change of mind. Regretting his former mildness of judgment he was now of the opinion that all who are guilty of publicly defending blasphemous articles ought to be killed by the magistrates. For the *Obrigkeith*, as the law of Moses clearly teaches, is bound to punish all public *blasphemers*.

It is more than strange that this same Melanchthon, in a memorandum of 1531, went even a step farther in his intolerance, for in it the mere rejection of the ministerial office is counted an insufferable blasphemy, and, since destruction of the church is sedition against the ecclesiastical order, like all other sedition it is punishable by death. Luther, who, in former days, had so expressly forbidden the use of the sword against those who taught differently from what he and his party held to be true, now concurred, though somewhat regretfully.

Karl Holl, seeking to defend Luther, while admitting that the laws against heresy continued to be enforced in Lutheran territorial churches, insists that these laws underwent a basic modification over against the Roman Catholic theory and practice with regard to heretics. He points first to the *beneficio emigrationis*, the right to emigrate, that was granted to all dissenters. He says:

A historical analysis must in this instance lay the stress not upon the compulsion to emigrate, but on the privilege and permission to emigrate. For it is at this point that we see the real progress whose greatness stands out brightly as we compare it with the refusal of that right by Louis XIV to his Huguenot citizens. Moreover, in Saxony the exodus of dissenters was to take place with due honor and decorum. The Evangelical State itself pronounces no judgment with regard to the faith of the emigrant. Neither then nor at any other time was a Catholic branded a "heretic" by the Protestant State, nor was ever one punished for the sake of his faith. That was not even true in England. There Catholics were persecuted because they were under suspicion, particularly since the powder plot, of being guilty of high treason. Cromwell excludes them from tolerance, because they are not dependable, because their yea is no yea, their nay no nay.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, *Luther*, I, pp. 485-486.



Again, Holl argues, that the evangelical law against heresy differed from the Catholic law, in that only those were affected by it who denied the doctrines of the Trinity and of the deity of Christ. Those who merely dissented from the particular evangelical or Lutheran doctrine were not affected by that law at all. In other words, to quote Holl once more, those who denied "a universally acknowledged fundamental doctrine, that is, a doctrine whose truth appeared so indubitably assured that its denial had to be evaluated as unquestioned blasphemy of God"<sup>9</sup> came under this law. Moreover, the Protestant law of heresy, in contrast to the Catholic law, became effective only where a person *publicly* taught against these doctrines.

Holl may be right in his interpretation of the administration of the Protestant law on heresy in contrast to the Catholic law on heresy. But even here Luther seemed inconsistent, for in 1535 he expressed the wish, as Bainton has put it, "that there were more English kings to kill cardinals." What can anyone say in defense of the cruel measures taken against the quiet Anabaptists, the Schwenkfelders and other sectaries? It must have been clear to men like Luther that the vast majority of Anabaptists and similar dissenters agreed with him on basic evangelical doctrines. Where they differed from the reformer was in their determination to realize more thoroughly the ideal of the autonomy of the local congregation and the demand for a regenerate membership. Yet, in the summer of 1530, Luther, in an exposition of Psalm 82, expressly declared that "Moses in his law commands to stone such blasphemers (that is, who teach against a public article of faith which is clearly grounded in Holy Writ and believed throughout the world), yea to stone all false teachers. Therefore let us not engage in long disputations, but condemn such public blasphemy forthwith and without a trial."<sup>10</sup>

In the same connection, Luther condemned the *Winkelschleicher*, that is, unauthorized preachers. Every pastor had his assigned parish, and no other person or stranger dared presume, without his permission, to teach in that parish. No matter how pious and just such a strange preacher might be, he should not

<sup>9</sup> Bainton, *op. cit.*, p. 120. Cf. Enders, X, 275.

<sup>10</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe*, VI, 229; XXXI, 1, 209.

even be permitted to preach in the parish of a Romanist. Unless such preachers and free lance evangelists could show proper credentials, they were to be avoided like the plague, for they were surely the devil's messengers. Even though they preached the pure gospel truth and were as eloquent as Gabriel, they were not to be listened to. If such people insisted in their unwarranted ministries, they were to be turned over to the authorities who, in turn, were to commit them to the *rechten Meister, der Meister Hans heisset*, that is, to the executioner!

Surely, these utterances differ radically from Luther's earlier positions, for in 1518, while he was still within the fold of the Roman Church, he taught that the burning of heretics was against the Holy Ghost.<sup>11</sup> Two years later he argued that heretics were to be overcome by "writings, and not with fire."<sup>12</sup>

In view of this development in Luther's attitude, Karl Holl's defense of the reformer seems rather forced and artificial. However, it must, in all candor, be admitted that the Protestant law on heresy represented a distinct advance over the continuing Catholic attitude and law. Holl rightly suggests that the large number of Lutherans who, later on at regular intervals, left the re-catholicized territories of Germany, proved that their faith was not without depth and resiliency. Catholics did not thus prove and attest their faith when they were urged to leave the domain of a Protestant ruler. Holl, too, justly alludes to the stubborn attitude of the hyper-Lutheran Church historian Flaccius who, rather than surrender his convictions, again and again allowed himself to be driven from his charge. In contrast to the firmness with which orthodox Lutherans held to their convictions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Holl asserts, and, I think, with reason, that the behavior of rationalists like Semler, Lessing, or even Kant and Rousseau—the leaders of a more enlightened era—awakens rather painful memories.

It is interesting, however, to note that Holl limits his defense of Luther's basic attitude on religious tolerance to the reformer's treatment of Catholics. Holl is strangely silent with reference to Luther's view towards the Anabaptists and other sectaries. Nor

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 624. *Erlangen Ausgabe*, XXIV, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 139.

does he say much in regard to Luther's abusive approach to the Jews. In a tract of 1542, the aging reformer, as Bainton remarks, "belched forth a mass of sulphurous irreconcilable recommendations," and wrote:

Burn the synagogues: take away their books, including the Bible. They should be compelled to work, denied food and shelter, preferably banished. If they mention the name of God, report them to the magistrate or throw *Säudreck* on them. Moses said that idolators should not be tolerated. If he were here he would be the first to burn their synagogues. If they want to follow Moses, let them go back to Canaan. I would rather be a sow than a Turkish emperor or a Jewish Messiah, for a sow fears neither hell nor the devil.<sup>13</sup>

Holl draws some fine distinctions as he compares the Catholic law on heresy and the Protestant view of the matter, but both the memorandum of 1531 to which he refers and that of 1536 which was prepared by the Wittenberg theologians and signed by Luther himself, completely obliterates any distinctions that formerly might have existed in theory, that is, as between false teaching and sedition on the one hand and heresy and blasphemy on the other. In this latter memorandum the *Obrigkeits* was summoned to suppress all open and false teaching, improper worship, and heresy. Even absenting oneself from public worship was from then on to be treated as blasphemy and to be met with the threat of banishment and excommunication. And, as Bainton also points out, by 1536 Luther had come to regard imprisonment and death to be preferable to banishment, since the latter simply spread the infection elsewhere.

In accordance with these views several Anabaptists were executed at Jena in 1536 at the behest of Melanchthon. The latter accompanied to the scaffold the condemned men who, even under torture, refused to recant their faith. Melanchthon interpreted their steadfastness as a terrible hardening by the devil. Nor was this execution of these humble Anabaptists an exceptional case. Hundreds, thousands, of their fellow believers were mercilessly put to death in most of the German territories. It is needless to add that, under the impetus of the Counter Reformation, the Catholics did their part in suppressing in a welter of blood the

<sup>13</sup> *Erlangen Ausgabe*, XXXII, 99-274, as quoted by Bainton, *op. cit.*, p. 121.



widely spread Anabaptists of the Tyrol, Austria, Moravia, and Southern Germany.

If we inquire into the reasons that caused Luther to change from his earlier and more liberal attitude to his later more illiberal one it is difficult to come to a conclusion. Wiswedel and Bainton both lean to the view that "a declining view to mysticism and humanism was not without bearing upon a decreasing tolerance."<sup>14</sup> This seems to be a reasonable interpretation of the matter. Luther's inherent conservatism may have been another contributing factor. Likewise the reformer's low estimate of human nature may have encouraged him towards a more authoritarian attitude both of church and state. "Christian pessimism with respect to human nature," wrote Paul Tillich a few years ago, "has helped a great deal to bring about the alliance between Christianity and authority."<sup>15</sup>

### SUMMARY

First, with regard to the church, it can be said that Luther taught clearly and convincingly concerning its essentially spiritual nature as the body of Christ. This spirituality of the church to the reformer involved a life *sub specie crucis* and not *sub specie gloriae*. Luther also had a clear insight into the hidden character and structure of the church, which is only known to God its divine author. But he was also aware of the involvements, sociologically speaking, of the church visible in the elements and ambiguities of this world. Luther, moreover, knew that the church lives and exists by the divine Word that is given to her, a Word which God in Christ has spoken in her midst. He realized profoundly the church's eschatological hope and outlook, and this insight implied the rejection of any idea of equating the church, Christ's kingdom, with any merely earthly realizations or political structures. But, as Franz Spemann has expressed it, Luther failed to realize his high ideal of the church in actual practice. We appropriate for ourselves the conclusion of this writer when he says:

<sup>14</sup> Bainton, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Tillich, "The Gospel and the State," *Crozer Quarterly*, October, 1938, XV, 258.

Calvin, the Reformer of western Europe, and John Knox confronted the difference between the Church of the Christians and the world more clearly and sharply, and both French and Scottish Protestants had real live congregations, we find in Luther's writings a constant flux with regard to that which belongs to a people (Volkstum) and that which is apostolic. This tendency in Luther has hurt German Protestantism. Lutheranism quite early cut itself off from non-German Protestantism. It never understood the spiritual greatness of their reformed brethren, instead it later entered the alliance with German idealism and this alliance led to the philosophical decomposition of the leading theology of the nineteenth century and contributed towards the renewal of the papacy. For Kant and Hegel are not the spiritual brethren of Luther, but Calvin; and it is not Goethe's Faust, but the Heidelberg Catechism which is nourished with the blood of the Reformation.<sup>16</sup>

Luther did indeed sever the church of Germany from papal control, but he reversed himself when, after 1526, he tried to rebuild the external structure of his movement on the basis of the Constantinian blueprint, that is, when he made the "Christian prince" the chief pivot of that structure. This explains also, at least in part, the bourgeois character of German Lutheranism, for, as Otto Piper has admitted, Luther's church never got a real grip on the common man in Germany.

Secondly, with regard to the state, be it said that Luther evinced in his early days as a reformer a rather clear view of the nature and function of secular authority. He was by no means a servile slave of the princes to whom he owed so much, but boldly he called them to order when he deemed their actions to be contrary to the best interests of church and state. However, while he divested the church of any coercive power, Luther invested the godly prince and the civil power with that authority which formerly the Church of Rome had claimed and, partially at least, exercised through the papacy. Luther anchored the authority of the civil power in the will of God and thus was able to enjoin absolute obedience to this God-ordained power upon all subjects. The reformer staunchly insisted that secular authority was not to be obeyed when the clear dictates of conscience and of the gospel were in jeopardy. On the

<sup>16</sup> Franz Spemann, *Von Heinrich W. Riehl bis Oswald Spengler*, pp. 45-46.

contrary, it must be repeated that Luther did not favor unbridled despotism, for he taught with unmistakable clarity that, since rulers derive their power directly from God, they were also ultimately accountable to God for all their actions in the final judgment. But, as Figgis has well said, "we must not confuse Luther with Hobbes"<sup>17</sup>; it is also true, as Holl has reminded us, that "the advance of absolutism in Germany was not impeded, but rather encouraged by the Reformation."<sup>18</sup> However, those who would establish a direct line between Luther and the rise of modern totalitarianism, ought not to forget that the promoters of the Catholic counter-Reformation witnessed in Catholic countries the establishment of absolutism much earlier and much more ruthless in character than did the Protestant princes of Germany. Maximilian of Bavaria and Ferdinand II of Austria used the fight against the Reformation as a means to make short shrift of the liberties of their lands.<sup>19</sup>

Luther, Figgis has suggested, was far more revolutionary than he realized. His work really meant the destruction of imperial authority and of the unity of the empire. From the Reformation onward, federalism was at a discount not only in Protestant Germany but also in most Catholic countries. But I think Figgis goes too far when he argues that Luther's work implied the "removal of all checks on princely tyranny." We do agree, however, that Luther's excessive emphasis upon the obedience of subjects to their rulers tended in the direction of an overconservative and uncritical attitude towards secular authority. By leaving the great problems of national life, that is, matters of state, economics, arts and sciences to their own devices, Lutheran ethics tended to become quietistic and therefore ineffective in the stream of life. The church, in turn, relied for its material existence and maintenance too much on the state and became excessively preoccupied with matters of dogma and doctrine to the detriment of Christian interaction with the total life of society.

<sup>17</sup> Figgis, *From Gerson to Grotius*, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 488 *fn.*



*Part Two*

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JOHN CALVIN'S VIEW  
OF CHURCH AND STATE

## Introduction

TWO facts throw into sharp relief the place and significance of John Calvin within the Reformation age: first, the priority in time of Martin Luther's reformatory work, and second, the fact that, in contrast to Luther, the work of his great contemporary Calvin assumed international proportions within the latter's life span.

Competent historians have from time to time shown how much Calvin was indebted to Luther both as regards his view of the church and of the state. The Genevan reformer on more than one occasion freely acknowledged what he owed to the prophet of Wittenberg. Nevertheless, there are decisive differences between the two reformers which cannot be overlooked. The manner in which each realized God reveals a difference of temperament. Karl Holl has perhaps best expressed this difference when he writes of Calvin: "The break with the past which made him a Reformer was different from that of Luther. There a troubled conscience found peace with God, here a quiescent conscience was rudely awakened from its slumber."<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, an analysis of Calvin's system of thought and its application to the problems of church and society, reveals both affinity with and radical difference from the ideas of Luther. In the latter we observe a large measure of spontaneity, a lack of systematic penetration, and the paradoxical tensions and contradictions so characteristic of the German mood. Calvin, on the other hand—in that a typical Frenchman—gives evidence of precision of thought, systematic completeness, and an uncompromising attitude which, once formed, will issue in the most resolute action for the glory of God. No wonder then that Beza could say of

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<sup>1</sup> *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, III, 255.

Calvin, "In the doctrine which he delivered at the first, he persisted steadily to the last, scarcely making any change."<sup>2</sup>

Kampschulte, a Catholic historian, analyzing Calvin's masterpiece, the *Institutes*, has written these discerning words:

Calvin's system as it is expressed in the *Institutes* has as its basis and presupposition the successes and achievements of the German Reformation. It is on that foundation that the author of the *Institutes* rears his proud, boldly towering edifice. Luther's ideas, basically, furnish him the building stones. But as he arranges and joins these building stones and relates the individual doctrines, the work under his hands receives an essentially different character than the new church order which had been erected in German lands, so that it resembles a completely new structure.<sup>3</sup>

There can be no doubt but that Calvin's reform was more radical, more consistent and also more effective than Luther's. While Luther retained much of the old religion, especially in the matter of ceremonies, Calvin's rigid logic would not permit him to be satisfied with half-way measures. His break with the Roman Church was such that it regarded Calvin and his system to be its deadly foe.

Again, the place and significance of Calvin in the context of Reformation days is indicated by his far-reaching influence within his own lifetime. Luther remained, for the most part, the reformer of Germans and Scandinavians. Calvin, as Charles Beard has well said, "is the only one of the great Reformers who can justly be called international."<sup>4</sup> While residing in the small city-state of Geneva, John Calvin soon came to exercise a worldwide ministry. Refugees gathered within the walls of the city, and many of them, after having undergone intensive theological training, went forth from Geneva to do battle for the Lord. Karl Müller wrote: "In this great Mission House for Western Europe they were trained to be the preachers and evangelists for the countries of Romance, English, Scottish, Dutch, Polish and Hungarian tongues. They were filled with Calvin's spirit, becoming men of iron strength, the

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Calvin*, p. XCVIII. (Calvin's Tracts, Vol. I.)

<sup>3</sup> *Johann Calvin, seine Kirche und sein Staat*, I, 258.

<sup>4</sup> *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century in its Relation to Modern Thought and Knowledge*, p. 244.



sacrificial courage of the ancient Greeks and men of world conquering heroism.”<sup>5</sup>

Calvin's correspondence with princes, statesmen, theologians, church leaders and fellow-religionists must have been exceedingly large. If we consider the extensive literary productions of the Genevan reformer—his commentaries, sermons and tracts—it is simply amazing to discover how through his letters with people all over Europe he directed the cause of the Reformed churches with skill and discretion. How fruitful and decisive Calvin's influence upon people of various nations has been is clearly brought out by Karl Holl, when he writes:

The far reaching power of the impulses which Calvin's movement released was really revealed in the larger area of a Church territory that transcended national boundaries. But Calvin's glory lay not in the heroism of the Huguenots or of the Covenanters, however glorious they were, but in the solid order of life which he was able to establish within the whole range of his influence. The institutions of Geneva went wherever his word reached, and through them Calvin became an educator of nations of world historic rank. The character of Calvinism in the different lands developed in a surprisingly uniform manner. Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Scots, however different in their national character, were changed into one and the same type. The attractive power of a logically developed dogma and the educative power of an independently organized Church have here become an unmistakable fact.<sup>6</sup>

The continuing influence of Calvin's ideas is evident as we review the history of recent centuries. Anglo-American Puritanism, the development of the Presbyterian churches in Scotland and the New World, the rise of such sects as the Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers, the New England theology since Jonathan Edwards, these and other religious movements owe much of their *élan* and power to Calvinistic influences. Our own century has witnessed a resurgence of vital theological thinking in the neo-Calvinist theology of crisis under the leadership of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. The Confessional Church in Nazi Germany has been led by Lutheran and Reformed pastors who received their

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<sup>5</sup> *Kirchengeschichte*, II, 474.

<sup>6</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-274.

inspiration mainly through neo-Calvinist channels. Neo-orthodoxy in the United States, represented by men like Reinhold Niebuhr, Elmer Homrighausen and John Mackay, reveal the impact of the reorientation in contemporary theology which Barth and his friends have brought about. To the mind of the writer, the first series of articles in the *Christian Century* under the caption "How my Mind has Changed in the last Decade" attest to the tremendous and pervasive influence of Calvinism in one form or another in the life and thought of American Protestantism.

To mention Karl Holl once more, it was he who, in 1909, pointed out that in both European and American Lutheranism Calvinism has been a strong ferment; and wherever the problems of theology, church polity, relation between church and state, the ethos of social life, have been up for discussion, there Calvin's ideas have reasserted themselves with considerable vigor.

This striking influence leads us to inquire as to the mainsprings of Calvin's thought. In view of the preciseness of the reformer's thinking our question is not difficult to answer. Calvin affirmed both the sovereignty of God and man's moral and spiritual responsibility towards God. The idea of the absolute relevance of God was fundamental in all of Calvin's thought. He, more than any other reformer, thought this idea through to its logical conclusion in order then fearlessly to act upon that insight. To see all things as God sees them, to render to God unreserved obedience, to lay every gift of mind, soul and body upon God's altar of service, to adore God as the all-wise and all-powerful Creator, and to trust him and his grace alone for one's redemption, that was Calvin's supreme concern. It is with this underlying motive always in mind that one must approach the distinctive affirmations of the Calvinistic system.

## *Calvin's Definitions of the Church*

IN ORDER to gain an objective view of Calvin's conception of the church it is pertinent to refer to some of his own definitions. Quite naturally we turn first of all to Calvin's famous work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Nineteen of the twenty chapters of the fourth book of the *Institutes* deal with the church in its various aspects. The apologetic character of this first theological treatise of Calvin, which he expanded constantly till 1559, is evident throughout this and every other part of the *Institutes*. Since it was written primarily in defense of the reformed religion against the attacks and slanders of its enemies, the abuses and idolatries of the Roman Church are constantly before the mind of the author. Speaking of the Roman Church, Calvin says:

The Church must necessarily fall whenever that sum of religion which alone can sustain it has given away. Again, if the true Church is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Tim. 3: 15), it is certain that there is no Church where lying and falsehood have usurped the ascendancy. Since this is the state of matters under the Papacy, we can understand how much of the Church there survives. There, instead of the ministry of the word, prevails a perverted government, compounded of lies, a government which partly extinguishes, partly suppresses, the pure light. In place of the Lord's Supper, the foulest sacrilege has entered, the worship of God is deformed by a varied mass of intolerable superstitions; doctrine (without which Christianity exists not) is wholly buried and exploded, the public assemblies are schools of idolatry and impiety.<sup>1</sup>

In this one passage containing as it does practically the full force of Calvin's indictment against the false Church of Rome, an in-

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Beveridge (trans.), *John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, iv, 42-43.



dictment which he will repeat in all his subsequent works with unabated vigor, we may discover already the lineaments of Calvin's basic conception of the church. Yet, while Calvin denies the name of church to the papists, he is nevertheless unwilling to avow "that there are no churches among them."<sup>2</sup> In this, Calvin sided with the other reformers, particularly with Martin Luther who, because of the continuance of baptism in the Roman Church, held that it was not entirely forsaken of the Lord. But the churches that do remain under the Roman authority are such "where Christ lies half-buried, the gospel is suppressed, piety is put to flight, and the worship of God almost abolished; where, in short, all things are in such disorder as to present the appearance of Babylon rather than the holy city of God."<sup>3</sup> It is only because "the Lord wondrously preserved some remains of his people"<sup>4</sup> within the pale of the false papal system that we can assume the continuance of churches there.

Turning from this negative definition of the church we now would refer to a more positive one in the work under discussion. Speaking of the church invisible, Calvin writes, "But as they are a small and despised number (that is those who belong to the Church), concealed in an immense crowd, like a few grains of wheat buried among a heap of chaff, to God alone must be left the knowledge of his Church, of which his secret election forms the foundation."<sup>5</sup>

In the following reference Calvin joins the descriptive definition of the church invisible with that of the church visible. Says he:

I have observed that the Scriptures speak of the Church in two ways. Sometimes when they speak of the Church they mean the Church as it really is before God—the Church into which none are admitted but those who by the gift of adoption are sons of God, and by the sanctification of the Spirit true members of Christ. In this case it not only comprehends the saints who dwell on the earth, but all the elect who have existed from the beginning of the world. Often, too, by the name of Church is designated the whole body of mankind scattered

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*

throughout the world, who profess to worship one God and Christ, who by baptism are initiated into the faith; by partaking of the Lord's Supper profess unity in true doctrine and charity, agree in holding the word of the Lord, and observe the ministry which Christ has appointed for the preaching of it. In this Church there is a very large mixture of hypocrites, who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance: of ambitious, avaricious, envious, evil-speaking men, some also of impurer lives, who are tolerated for a time, either because their guilt cannot be legally established, or because due strictness of discipline is not always observed.<sup>6</sup>

In the same context Calvin speaks of the church universal as "the multitude collected out of all nations, who, though dispersed and far distant from each other, agree in one truth of divine doctrine, and are bound together by the tie of a common religion."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, single churches, provided they preach the sound doctrine of the gospel and rightly administer the sacraments while not being neglectful of exercising discipline, are entitled to the name church.

As we turn from the *Institutes* to Calvin's commentaries and homilies, we find a striking agreement with the definitions and descriptions already given. In fact, the agreement is so great that one may almost pick at random passages from the most diverse portions of Calvin's exegetical works and yet find him true to his basic conceptions. To prove our point, we cite selected passages from both Old and New Testament upon which Calvin has made comment.

In a homily on Hebrews 13: 13 Calvin emphasizes that one distinct feature of the church of all times is that it will ever be subject to conflict and persecution. He says, "Therefore, on seeing how the Church of God is trampled upon in the present day by proud worldlings, how one barks and another bites, how they torture, how they plot against her, how she is assailed incessantly by mad dogs and savage beasts, let it remind us that the same thing was done in all the olden time."<sup>8</sup>

The same sentiment is vividly expressed in a comment on Psalm 87. Calvin argues thus:

<sup>6</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, iv, 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin's *Commentaries on the Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians with Four Homilies or Sermons*, p. 426. (Calvin Tract Society.)

Nay, her triumphs were in the blood of Martyrs; and in proportion as she was rich in spirit, was she poor in worldly wealth;—in proportion as she was precious and lovely in holiness, before God and angels, was she contemptible to the world. She had many declared enemies who persecuted her cruelly, or who plotted her internal ruin by underhand means. There were many traitors and wicked conspirators, just as the devil never ceases to molest her by hypocrites. In a word, her dignity was still hidden under the cross of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning the centrality of the church for all believers who must not, because of its corruptions, easily forsake its fold, Calvin writes:

God expressly sends his children into the bosom of the Church. Why so? Just because this is the order he has established whereby to gather together his children as it were by flocks. This is very well expressed by a fine similitude which the same prophet employs, saying (Isaiah ix: 8) that Christians will be like pigeons returning in flights to their dove-cot. And what, pray, is this dove-cot, but just every place where the Word of God is preached, where the Sacraments are administered, and the name of God is proclaimed?<sup>10</sup>

In still another sermon, on Psalm 87, Calvin again stresses the necessity of abiding in the fold of the visible church, for he writes:

. . . St. Paul says that we begin to be children of God and of the Church when we are regenerated of incorruptible seed, and formed into new creatures; and, in fact, there is no other way by which we are regenerated into the heavenly life than by the ministry and through the medium of the Church.<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis coincides exactly with what Calvin has written in his *Institutes* with reference to the need of our being members of the visible church. There we read:

But as it is now our purpose to discourse of the visible Church, let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, Third homily or sermon on Psalm 87: 4, p. 440.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 481.



angels (Matt. xxii: 30). For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for, as Isaiah and Joel testify (Isa. xxxvii: 32; Joel ii: 32).<sup>12</sup>

Having started this section with one of Calvin's typical criticisms of the papal Church, we shall conclude it by presenting yet another such indictment from his commentary on Ezekiel 2: 6, where, after pouring his venom upon the false claims of Rome, he writes:

Since, therefore, God allows us to despise language of this kind, there is no reason why the Papists of this day should daunt us, when, with inflated cheeks, they thunder out the name of the Church and the Apostolic authority; for just honour is not attributed to God, unless every lofty thing in the world is compelled to obey him, so that the doctrine alone may shine forth which comes direct from the mouth of God.<sup>13</sup>

It was in the spring of 1539 that Cardinal Sadoletto, bishop of Carpentras, on behalf of other Roman prelates and at the behest of the Roman pontiff, addressed a letter to the senate and people of Geneva in order to woo them back to the fold of the Roman Church. Calvin, then an exile from Geneva in Strasburg, wrote a spirited reply in the beginning of September of that year. Kampschulte, the Catholic historian, has called this *Responsio ad Sadoleti epistolam* "eine der glaenzendsten Streitschriften, die je aus seiner [Calvin's] Feder geflossen."<sup>14</sup> After mercilessly unmasking the pretensions of the Roman Church as well as refuting unfounded charges against his personal character, Calvin proceeds to question Sadoletto's definition of the church. The learned cardinal had pointed out to the Genevan people that at all times the Roman Church "had been . . . directed by the one Spirit of Christ." Calvin, in turn, reminded his opponent that "the Church is indeed governed by the Holy Spirit, but in order that government might not be vague and unstable, he annexed it to the Word."<sup>15</sup> It is the written Word of God which is, to use Calvin's

<sup>12</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin's *Commentaries on the Prophet Ezekiel*, I, 121.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 354. ("One of the most brilliant controversial writings which ever came from Calvin's pen.")

<sup>15</sup> Calvin's *Tracts*, I, 35.

apposite phrase, "the Lydian Stone, by which the Church tests all doctrines."<sup>16</sup> In the same connection Calvin then says:

Learn, then, by your own experience, that it is no less unreasonable to boast of the Spirit without the Word, than it would be absurd to bring forward the Word itself without the Spirit. Now, if you can bear to receive a truer definition of the Church than your own, say, in future, that it is the society of all the saints, a society spread over the whole world, and existing in all ages, yet bound together by the one doctrine, and the one Spirit of Christ, cultivates and observes unity of faith and brotherly concord. With this Church we deny that we have any disagreement. Nay, rather, as we revere her as our mother, so we desire to remain in her bosom.<sup>17</sup>

Concerning the tangible marks of a true church of Christ, Calvin has this to say in his letter to Sadoletto:

Since there are three things on which the safety of the Church is founded, viz., doctrine, discipline, and the sacraments, and to these a fourth is added, viz., ceremonies, by which to exercise the people in offices of Piety, in order that we may be most sparing of the honour of your Church, by which of these things would you have us to judge her?<sup>18</sup>

Needless to say, Calvin had but a devastating answer to his own query. The Roman Church, he averred here as in many other portions of his works, has allowed "the truth of Prophetical and Evangelical doctrine to perish." Everything that is dear to the Reformers and which both the holy Scriptures and the writings of the church fathers enjoin is being furiously persecuted by the Church which Cardinal Sadoletto has tried to endear to the Genevan people.

In a similar vein, perhaps even more sharply, Calvin replied to the *Articles Agreed Upon By The Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris*. The learned doctors of Paris University had asserted that the church, with the hierarchy as the infallible sign of her inherent character and presence in the world, "is at all times visible." Because the Holy Spirit cannot err and the church being immediately directed by the Holy Spirit, the doctors also argued for the

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Calvin's Tracts, I, p. 38.

infallibility of the church. Against these bold assertions Calvin set his own thesis, saying:

That there is an universal Church, that there has been, from the beginning of the world, and will be even to the end, we all acknowledge. The appearance by which it may be recognized is the question. We place it in the Word of God, or, (if any one would so put it) since Christ is her head, we maintain that, as a man is recognized by his face, so she is to be beheld in Christ: as it is written, "Where the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together" (Matt. XXIV: 28). Again, "There will be one sheepfold, and one Shepherd" (John X: 16). But as the pure preaching of the gospel is not always exhibited, neither is the face of Christ always conspicuous (I Cor. XI: 19). Thence we infer that the Church is not always discernible by the eyes of men, as the examples of many ages testify.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin even avowed in this rejoinder to the theologians of Paris that the church "errs not, because she follows the truth of God for her rule; but if she recedes from this truth, she ceases to be a spouse, and becomes an adulteress."<sup>20</sup> Over against the pomp and prowess of the Roman Church, Calvin set down the dictum of Hilary of Poitiers who, long ago, had written, "We do wrong in venerating the Church of God in roofs and edifices. Is it doubtful that in these Antichrist will sit? Safer to me are mountains, and woods, and lakes, and dungeons, and whirlpools; for in these, either hidden or immersed, did prophets prophesy."<sup>21</sup>

When the German Imperial Diet was about to meet at Speyer in 1544 John Calvin, ever eager to defend the cause of the evangelicals, wrote a "humble exhortation," addressed to the German Emperor Charles V, on *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. Here, too, as in his earlier letter to Cardinal Sadoletto, Calvin insisted that, instead of mere claims and assertions, to be the true church Rome should hasten to prove by its doctrine and conduct the reality of the Church. Wrote he:

They . . . insist on the term Church. But where, we ask, is that doctrine which Paul declares to be the only foundation of the Church? Doubtless your Imperial Majesty now sees that there is a vast differ-

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> *Loc. cit.*



ence between assailing us with the reality and assailing us only with the name of Church. We are as ready to confess as they are that those who abandon the Church, the common mother of the faithful, the "pillar and ground of the truth," revolt from Christ also; but we mean a Church which, from incorruptible seeds, begets children for immortality, and, when begotten, nourishes them with spiritual food, (that seed and food being the Word of God) and which, by its ministry, preserves entire the truth which God deposited in its bosom. This mark is in no degree doubtful, in no degree fallacious, and it is the mark which God himself impressed upon his Church, that she might be discerned thereby. Do we seem unjust in demanding to see this mark? Wherever it exists not, no face of a Church is seen. If the name, merely, is put forward, we have only to quote the well-known passage of Jeremiah, "Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these," (Jer. VII: 4). "Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (Jer. VII: 11) <sup>22</sup>

Speaking of the unity of the church which papists accused the reformers of having broken and willfully destroyed, Calvin protests that he and his fellow-religionists hold it to be sacred, but, he argues, it is the false Church of Rome that has, through its faithlessness and lust for power, as well as through the usurped authority of the pope, robbed the church of the true center of its unity, even Jesus Christ. For says Calvin:

Let it, therefore, be a fixed point, that a holy unity exists amongst us, when, consenting in pure doctrine, we are united in Christ alone. . . . Heresies and Schisms, therefore, arise when a return is not made to the origin of truth, when neither the head is regarded, nor the doctrine of the heavenly Master preserved. <sup>23</sup>

In the same vein, Calvin addressed Pope Paul III when the latter, in August, 1544, upbraided the German emperor for "certain unbecoming decrees, and more unbecoming proposals" with regard to the reform of the church. Calvin wrote:

I indeed admit that dire vengeance from God impends over all who make it their endeavour to violate the unity of the Church. But what greater violation of unity, than when purity of doctrine is adulterated, and agreement in it destroyed, and Christ, in consequence, torn as it

<sup>22</sup> *Calvin's Tracts*, I, p. 214.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

were to pieces? And who, Farnese, but yourself, is the author and high priest of this dismemberment? I know it is not your fault that we do not all preach one head upon earth, one Roman See, as Mother and Queen; but whose fault is it but yours that we do not all from the heart confess one God and one faith, as we have all one baptism? But why do you call that the Principal See, which destitute now for above eight hundred years of a true bishop, first gave a place to dead images, and is at this day occupied by a leader in impiety, a most cruel tyrant of souls, an inveterate enemy of Christ, a prime devastator of the Church? <sup>24</sup>

As we turn from Calvin's tracts to his confessions and catechism we again find him reflecting the same views, basically at least, concerning the nature and function of the church. Thus, in the Genevan Confession of 1536, the church is defined as follows:

While there is but one Church of Jesus Christ, we however know that necessity requires that the fellowships be scattered in various places; yet each of these fellowships is called the Church. But, in view of the fact that all fellowships that do not gather in the name of the Lord but to blaspheme and pollute him by their sacrileges, we understand the true mark by which to discern the Church of Jesus Christ to be where his holy Gospel is purely and faithfully preached, declared, listened to and heeded; where the Sacraments are rightly administered, even though there continue to be some imperfections and flaws, as they will always be among men. On the contrary, where the Gospel is not declared, heard and received, there we recognize by no means the Church. The Churches under the control of the pope are rather the synagogues of the devil than Christian Churches. <sup>25</sup>

Philip Schaff rightly has called the Gallican Confession of 1559 "a faithful summary of the doctrines of Calvin." <sup>26</sup> While Calvin only prepared the first draft—the enlarged form of this Confession having been made by his pupil, Antoine de la Roche Chandieu—we refer to it to throw further light on our problem. Articles XXV and XXXIII deal with various phases of the church's order. Articles XXVII and XXVIII are most pertinent to our present purpose. We quote them in full:

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 273–274.

<sup>25</sup> Karl E. F. Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> *Creeeds of Christendom*, I, 495.

## ARTICLE XXVII

Nevertheless we believe that it is important to discern with care and prudence which is the true Church, for this title has been much abused. We say, then, according to the Word of God, that it is the company of the faithful who agree to follow his Word, and the pure religion which it teaches; who grow in grace all their lives, believing and becoming more confirmed in the fear of God according as they feel the want of growing and pressing onward. Even although they strive continually, they can have no hope save in the remission of their sins. Nevertheless we do not deny that among the faithful there may be hypocrites and reprobates, but their wickedness can not destroy the title of the Church.

## ARTICLE XXVIII

In this belief we declare that, properly speaking, there can be no Church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments. Therefore we condemn the papal assemblies, as the pure Word of God is banished from them, their sacraments are corrupted, or falsified, or destroyed, and all idolatries are in them. We hold then that all who take part in these acts, and commune in that Church, separate and cut themselves off from the body of Christ. Nevertheless, as some trace of the Church is left in the papacy, and the virtue and substance of baptism remain, and as the efficacy of baptism does not depend upon the person who administers it, we confess that those baptized in it do not need a second baptism. But, on account of its corruptions, we can not present children to be baptized in it without incurring pollution.<sup>27</sup>

We conclude this section with a reference to the Genevan Catechism of the year 1545. The question "Quid est ecclesia?" yields the answer, "Corpus ac societas fidelium, quos Deus ad vitam aeternam praedestinavit."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the church is the society of the faithful whom God has predestined unto eternal life. When the further question is asked why the church is called catholic or universal, the answer reads: "Eo docemur, sicut unum est fidelium omnium caput, ita omnes in unum corpus coalescere oportere, ut una sit ecclesia per totum orbem diffusa, non plures."

<sup>27</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 228. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, I, 375-376.

<sup>28</sup> "What is the church? . . . It is the body and society of the faithful whom God has predestined unto eternal life."



Just a little further on, the question arises concerning the visible and the invisible church. In harmony with views which Calvin expressed to Cardinal Sadoletto, the learned doctors of Paris, as well as in his *Institutes*, we read:

M. Moreover, can this Church be known otherwise than to the believer by faith?

P. It is indeed, and it is a visible Church of God which he described to us by proofs and signs; but here it properly deals with the congregating of those whom he has chosen for salvation by his hidden election. These things, however, are neither always discerned with the eyes, nor distinguished by signs.<sup>29</sup>

Then, linking the forgiveness of sins to the church, the question is asked why the two elements should be joined. The Catechism reads:

Q. Why do you bind the forgiveness of sins to the Church?

A. Because no one attains it who has not been united before the people of God and he protects the unity since they persevere in the body of Christ to the very end; by this same method he gives testimony that he is a true member of the Church.<sup>30</sup>

As in the *Institutes*,<sup>31</sup> the Catechism follows this question with a query regarding the problem of whether or not one's being out of the church is ruinous to man's ultimate destiny. We read:

Q. Do you, by this reasoning, insist that being outside the Church means condemnation and destruction?

A. Yes, indeed, for whoever separates himself from the body of Christ and by factions destroys its unity, to them all hope of salvation has been cut off as long as they remain in that kind of separation.<sup>32</sup>

Concerning the present perfection of the church, warding off the perfectionist views of radical sectaries, Calvin frames this question:

Q. Truly, is not what you attribute to the Church, a sanctity already perfected and completed?

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>30</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

- A. Not yet: certainly not as long as one still struggles in this world. Therefore always strive against weaknesses, for inwardly he will never be purified fully of the remaining blemishes until he cleaves to Christ, by whom he is sanctified.<sup>33</sup>

The chief purpose of both confessions and catechisms, I am sure, Calvin conceived as teaching men—children as well as their elders—rightly to worship their Creator and Redeemer-Lord. The Genevan reformer would no doubt have fully approved the classical formulation of his own life purpose as expressed in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* whose first question aptly summarizes the first three questions of Calvin's Catechism of 1545, namely: "What is the chief end of man?"

ANSWER: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Schaff, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

## *Analysis of Calvin's Definitions*

TO THE student of church history it is an obvious fact that Calvin's emphasis upon the church as the "ground and pillar of the truth" was also the claim of the Roman Church which he so passionately opposed. From Gregory VII to Pius IX the Roman pontiffs have again and again declared this fact. But still there is a significant difference between Calvin's assertion of this fact and that of the Roman Church. The latter's position which Pope Paul III subtly drove home to the German Emperor Charles V in the Paternal Admonition of 1544<sup>1</sup> found its dogmatic confirmation in the Vatican affirmation of the doctrine of papal infallibility in 1870. Here, despite historic evidence to the contrary, all *ex cathedra* utterances of the pope are asserted to be infallible, whenever he deigns to speak "in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians." Calvin, however, while fully avowing that the church does not err as long as she follows Christ, clearly taught that when she ceases to obey her supreme head, then she is subject to error and apostasy, and the once obedient spouse of Christ becomes an adulteress. This, Calvin asserted, had always brought the just judgment of God down upon the church, both in its corporate form as also upon its individual members and, most of all, upon its appointed leaders. In other words, Calvin fully stood for two things: first, that the church, if true to her Lord, does not err; secondly, as soon as the church departs from her Lord, she is not only no longer beyond all error, but in that moment ceases to be a true church. That is to say, Calvin refused to make of the church, in its empirical expression, absolute judgments or clothe her with absolute infallibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin's Tracts, I, 235-253.



The definitions which we have given in the foregoing chapter bear out the contention that John Calvin, together with his forerunner Martin Luther, believed the church to be essentially the mystical body of Christ, a divine-human organism, whose ultimate ground of existence lay in the trans-subjective fact of the electing grace of God. The beginning of the church, according to the Genevan reformer, is traceable to the inscrutable decree of divine election in eternity. The end of the church is its ultimate translation into the presence of God and its enjoyment of God in all eternity.

The act of divine election is, as it were, the primary cause of the church's existence. It is, therefore, legitimate to assert that Calvin held that the church of Christ is an entity with which nothing older or greater is at all comparable. However, as Bohatec has shown, the act of election does not, in Calvin's thinking, coincide in time with the *insitio in corpus Christi*. As this scholar has put it:

According to the "ordo" of divine mercy the elect are called, illumined through the power of the Holy Spirit unto faith, born again and thus incorporated into Christ. There are, then, various "stages" on this way of redemption. The first is the (pre-temporal) election of grace, the second the surrender of the elect to Christ and the translation into the Church on the basis of faith. The third is the firm rooting in the fellowship with God and his Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Before their conversion the elect are hidden in the *massa perditionis* of the children of Adam. Only by the mercy of God are the elect kept from plunging into the abyss of ultimate separation from God. Thus the church is doubly hidden, that is, first in the eternal decree of God and second in the mass of the damned. The church then, in its essential nature, as a *Wesenskirche*, is indeed a dynamic God-willed entity, though as such not empirically perceivable by the senses.

Calvin does not weary of stressing the truth that as Christ is the sole ground of our redemption so he is also the sole head of the church which he has redeemed with his own blood. Not the pope or a group of prelates or any other creature may presume to usurp the place that belongs to Christ as the supreme head of his

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<sup>2</sup> Bohatec, *Calvins Lehre von Staat und Kirche*, p. 269.

body. It is Christ to whom all true believers are knit in an indissoluble union, the union and unity of Christ's body. As Calvin has put it: "The elect of God are all thus united and joined together in Christ, so that just as they hang from one head, just in that way they grow together into one body: these growing together among themselves by a union are members of the same body."<sup>3</sup>

Christ, Calvin avowed, having been declared to be the Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead, is in possession of all necessary power to preserve the unity of his body, the church. But the unity of the church consists not, as Catholic dogma and teaching imply, in Christ infusing *naturaliter* (as by a natural process) his own substance into its members, but he rather, in a dynamic impartation of the energy of his Spirit, empowers his body for faith and action. Hence, to quote Bohatec again:

The designation of Christ as Head is therefore no mere honorific name; it expresses rather the all inclusive sovereign rule and power of Christ. As the Head Christ is the prince and leader of his people which he governs with his highest sovereign authority as a ruler (*summam regnandi auctoritatem*). He governs it with the marvellous, psychologically incomprehensible power and energy of his Spirit and he sustains it within his body as a fellowship both in its relation to himself and to God.<sup>4</sup>

With the writer of the epistle to the Ephesians, Calvin identifies Christ not only as head of his body, the church, but also as the supreme head of the cosmos. However, be it noted that Calvin does not on that account lose sight of the peculiar and eternal significance and place of the church in the economy of God.

We find Calvin, like Luther, identifying the church of Christ with the kingdom of God. As men are ingrafted into the body of Christ they at once enter the kingdom of God. Since that kingdom denotes the scope and extent of God's rule, the church is part and parcel of it, for it, too, is subject to God's gracious government. To Calvin the church is the divinely appointed bearer and herald of the kingly rule of God. She must, therefore, be a well-ordered church in her empirical expression in order that through her life and conduct the world may ever be reminded of God's claim upon

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, from Op. 1, 72.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 271.

her. The church which Calvin equates with the kingdom of God is not a static, but a dynamic, growing thing. Consequently, let the church beware, lest she forget that "the kingdom of God cometh not by observation," a truth which Augustine, for example, when he spoke as an ecclesiastical statesman, had been prone to ignore.

To Calvin, as the above references to his definitions indicate, the Old and the New Testament form an integrated whole. Both Testaments speak on every page of God's glory in grace and judgment. The Old Covenant is the arrow pointing towards the New. Analogous to an emphasis of Irenaeus, the Genevan reformer makes much of the restitution of all things which the coming of Christ has ushered in. What God intended in creation was forfeited by man's fall. But God started afresh with Israel in order to realize his eternal designs through that nation. Israel, alas, failed. And now, through the advent of Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, the church has come into being. In her life, the rule of God's sovereign power is to be expressed. As Schrenk has interpreted Calvin's view of the matter, this rule entails that "Where Christ reigns, everything is radically restituted."<sup>5</sup> And that restitution includes the restoration of the Davidic kingdom and of Abraham's covenant, not in their external, earthly, and perishable features, but in their prophetic significance, aiming at the inner, spiritual renewal of man into the image of God. Calvin wrote:

We know when David was created king that the foundations of the eternal kingdom were established which, however, had been exposed at the advent of Christ; and that temporary throne on which the descendants of David sat was a likeness of the perpetual dominion to which Christ has been given by the Father so that he may possess complete power, as much in heaven as on earth; there is no doubt that the prophet will command the faithful to seek the advancement of his spiritual kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

In another connection Calvin points the same truth when he writes:

We know that the spiritual kingdom was foretold in David. What else was David then than a type of Christ? One must always make a transi-

<sup>5</sup> Gottlob Schrenk, *Gottesreich und Bund im aelteren Protestantismus*, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> *Opera* 32, 210.



tion from that temporal kingdom to the eternal, from that visible one to the spiritual, from the earthly to the heavenly.<sup>7</sup>

In his commentary on Ezekiel, particularly the section dealing with Ezekiel 16: 60-63, Calvin expounds also the relation between the church and the old covenant. He speaks of the perfidy of Israel and how the covenant lost its effect because God's chosen people had ignored God's commandments. Yet God will not be unmindful of his covenant that he made with his people. And while "the body on the whole must perish, a small band only was reserved. We know, therefore, that this promise (that is, the covenant) was not common to all the sons of Abraham who were his offspring according to the flesh, but it was peculiar to the elect alone."<sup>8</sup> In Ezekiel 16: 60 God promises both that he will remember his covenant and that he will establish an *everlasting* covenant. That everlasting covenant is realized in Christ. Says Calvin:

This passage, then, cannot be understood except of the new covenant which God has established by the hand of Christ. But these two clauses are so mutually united (that is, the reminder of the old covenant and the promise of the new) that they ought to be carefully weighed, namely, that God here gives the hope of a new covenant, and yet teaches us that it originates in the old one already abolished through the people's fault. Thus we see that the New Testament flows from that covenant which God made with Abraham, and afterwards sanctioned by the hand of Moses. That which is promulgated for us in the Gospel is called the New Covenant, not because it had no beginning previously, but because it was renewed, and better conditions added; for we know that the Law was abrogated by the New Covenant. Whether it be so or not, the excellence of the New Testament is not injured, because it has its source and occasion in the Old Covenant, and is founded on it.<sup>9</sup>

The new covenant established by Christ aims just like the old covenant at the glorification of God and the establishment of God's rule over the hearts and minds and bodies of men everywhere. It ties up with God's original intention in creating the world, that is,

<sup>7</sup> *Opera* 39, 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Commentaries on the Prophet Ezekiel* (Calvin Translation Society), II, 173.

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. cit.*

that "God has created the whole world in order that it may become the theatre of his glory." <sup>10</sup> *Soli Deo Gloria!*

The believer's part in the covenant of grace, instituted by Jesus Christ, Calvin sums up under several headings: negatively, each member of the covenant and the kingdom is to deny himself and the world, and constantly strive towards the subduing of his passions; positively, each believer must yield unconditional obedience to the Most High, which obedience implies seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Calvin often uses a three-fold description of the believer's aspirations: the glorification of God, the service of God, and the sanctification of our lives.<sup>11</sup> This, too, must be the aspiration as well as the dynamic motive of the church as a corporate entity, that is, as the body of Christ who, through his life and death, yielded a perfect obedience to his Heavenly Father. As one who was "obedient unto death, yea the death of the cross," Christ has set an example which the church ought to emulate.

A number of scholars have in recent years pointed out that after 1539<sup>12</sup> or 1541<sup>13</sup> Calvin came to emphasize increasingly the idea of the visible and empirical church. This preoccupation with the visible church on earth led, some thinkers hold, to a reassertion of Catholic views of the church by the reformer of Geneva.<sup>14</sup> We shall find occasion to deal with the conflicting interpretations of Calvin's view of the church a little later. Suffice it to say at this juncture that, whereas Calvin undoubtedly attached great importance to a well-ordered church on earth, he never lost sight of the idea that the "ecclesia proprie dicta" is the church invisible and as such only known to God. With Bohatec, the writer would point out that the very fact that Calvin, just as Luther, combined the idea of the church as a dynamic organism with the idea of the

<sup>10</sup> *Corpus Reformatorum*, XXXVI, 294: Totum mundum hoc fine Deum condidisse, ut gloriae suae theatrum foret.

<sup>11</sup> *Opera*, LVIII, 82: Le Royaume de Dieu c'est que Dieu soit glorifié en nous, qu'il soit servi et adoré, que nous lui soions peuple, comme il nous sanctifie aussi mutuellement.

<sup>12</sup> Wernle, *Calvin (Der evangelische Glaube III)*, pp. 56, 66, 355 ff.

<sup>13</sup> M. Courvoisier-Patry, *Journal de Genève*, numéro spécial, Juin, 1936, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Seeberg, *Dogmengeschichte* IV, II, 610-13.

kingdom of God precludes the possibility of Calvin ever forgetting what constitutes the real and intrinsic nature of the church. The church, therefore, is a mystical entity in its essence and origin, an object of faith, real, not merely a Platonic abstract idea, not carnal, but spiritual; hence, the church is not circumscribed by limits of space or time. Nor is it to be overlooked that to Calvin, as to Luther, even the *ecclesia externa* is, in the last analysis, an object of faith.<sup>15</sup> True, the church on earth has external signs by which it may be known, but even these point beyond themselves, that is, to the divine and eternal character of the church.

It is precisely because of his view of the church as a "corpus Christi verum" in distinction from the "corpus Christi simulatum,"<sup>16</sup> that Calvin rejects the view of the Anabaptists who presumed to be able to say with apodictic certainty who were the true members of the church and who were not. In the church on earth, we are to recognize all as members who, with us, confess the same faith and, through participation in the sacraments and the example of their lives, acknowledge the same Lord. But such an acknowledgment of our fellow Christians is more a judgment of love than a judgment of reason, for we can at no time know with absolute assurance who are God's children, for, as the Scriptures teach, God alone "knows those who are his own."<sup>17</sup>

In his *Commentaries* and *Sermons*, as in the *Institutes* and his *Tracts*, Calvin always speaks out of a serene confidence whenever he discusses the destiny of the church. The church in its divine aspects is not subject to the laws of creatureliness, for it is founded on the eternal and royal throne of Christ. Though the church be engaged in endless conflict with sin and the devil, she will yet endure. Even though the universe collapse, the church shall not and cannot fail. For it is God himself who sustains her in the midst of time and all its upheavals. As Augustine once put it, *pugnare potest, expugnari non potest*. In a moving passage in the *Institutes*, Calvin describes the trials and triumphs of the church in this manner:

<sup>15</sup> Bohatec, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

<sup>16</sup> De unitate eccl., c. 18, quoted by Henri Clavier, *Études Sur Le Calvinisme*, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Timothy 2: 19 (RSV). Cf. *Institutes*, II, 19-20.



Because it is not earthly or carnal nor is subject to decay, but spiritual, it lifts our thought unto eternal life so that we pass through this life with its burdens, with its hunger and its cold, its contempt and calumny and other cares patiently, content that our King will tirelessly care for us in our needs and wants until we have won the fight and been called to triumph. For that is the way of His government that he gives us everything that he has received from the Father. Because he equips us with his might, adorns us with his splendour and glory, enriches us with his gifts, we have all we need and have abundant reason for boasting, and we receive a strong confidence to fight without fear against the devil, sin, and death. And as we, clothed with his righteousness, overcome all the reproach of the world with brave courage, and as he in his kindness pours out over us his gifts, thus we will in turn use these fruits to his honor and glory.<sup>18</sup>

This assurance of Christ's ultimate triumph has been, to a large extent, responsible for the spiritual aggressiveness, the strong sense of mission, and the heroic exploits of persecuted Calvinists like the Huguenots. Troeltsch has called Calvin's faith quite properly "a religion of heroism and activity." The church, under the impact of this faith, knows herself to be a *militia Christi*, engaged in incessant battles with God's counter player Satan. In the last analysis, it is God himself fighting Satan within and through his church. And, as Karl Froehlich has well pointed out, "the conflict of God's Kingdom and the struggle with daemonic powers, which occurs within the dimensions of the theater of history, is mirrored in the spiritual experience of every single Christian."<sup>19</sup> The individual Christian undergoes severe inner testings as a soldier of Jesus Christ, and it is only through agonizing prayer that he will prevail. But not the heroism of the individual soldier of the *militia Christi* nor that of the church is here at stake, but only the obedience that every true disciple ought to own towards God. There is no time for resting on one's laurels, for new spiritual conflicts are to be endured when old battles have been won. For Calvin admonishes his fellow believers with the words: "Let us then, provided with firm steadfastness and untiring strength be continually prepared for new battles."<sup>20</sup> In firm constancy and with inde-

<sup>18</sup> *Corpus Reformatorum*, XXX, 364. (Author's translation.)

<sup>19</sup> *Gottesreich, Welt und Kirche bei Calvin*, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Corpus Reformatorum*, LIX, 313.

fatigable valor, the soldiers of the Lord are to be ready for whatever conflicts his wisdom may have in store for their spiritual discipline. A manly fortitude, drawing its strength from the Lord of lords, is the result of such faith which is ever driven to heroic activity for the sake of the extension of God's reign. Even when all odds seem against the individual disciple of Christ or his church, this must not lead to capitulation to the foe. Thus Calvin wrote to Farel: "Truly, if our calling be from the Lord, as we doubt not, the Lord will bless us even if all things are against us. Therefore we will try all helps, and if they fail, we will expend our energy to the very last."<sup>21</sup>

In all these utterances bearing on the ordeals of the church in the midst of time, Calvin holds before her vision the hope of her ultimate consummation and triumph. The church whose existence is founded on the gracious will and purpose of God, a purpose which has its mysterious anchorage in God's eternity, cannot perish.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 38b, 331.

## *Conflicting Interpretations of Calvin's View*

### I. RUDOLF SOHM'S CHARGE

In his famous *Kirchenrecht* Sohm has tried to play Luther out against Calvin. Sohm affirms that whereas the Wittenberg reformer, by his rediscovery of the church of Christ as an invisible entity, effectively overcame the perversions of both paganism and Catholicism, John Calvin, in turn, reverted to the medieval, Roman Catholic pattern of thought by his emphasis, especially after 1541, upon the visible church as a juridically organized fellowship.

Sohm seems to labor under a strong bias against the idea of the visible church. The latter, to him, is no church at all in the proper—that is, New Testament and Lutheran—sense of the word. The church on earth is part and parcel of the world. Moreover, Sohm also asserts that Calvin's insistence upon the church as the mother of the faithful—the church as a *Heilsanstalt* or an institution of salvation—is thoroughly Catholic and contrary to Luther's understanding of the church.

In view of what we have discussed in previous sections, we hold that Sohm is mistaken in his indictment of Calvin's basic view of the church. First of all, it must not be forgotten that Calvin's constant emphasis upon the organic, dynamic-mystical unity between the risen Christ, the only and sovereign head of the church, and the members of his body, is a real safeguard against the institutional corruption of the church in a hierarchically constituted visible organization. Second, the sources, as Bohatec and others, especially Karl Holl, have shown, reveal that not only Calvin but



also Luther held the idea of the visible church, side by side with that of the *ecclesia invisibilis*, the *ecclesia stricte dicta*. It cannot be denied that the relation of these two aspects of the church presents difficulties of no mean proportions. As regards Luther's view, Ernst Rietschel<sup>1</sup> has even spoken of irreconcilable conflicting interpretations prevalent among competent students of history. But whatever the difficulty of interpretation may be in this matter, it is quite unjustified to establish Luther's position as far superior to that of Calvin, as Sohms has evidently attempted to do. Lastly, while Luther was not overly interested in the external and organizational aspects of the church visible, he nevertheless, like Calvin, became more and more interested in these matters after 1527 when the evangelical movement which he had launched was being organized in definite forms. Luther, too, speaks of the church as the mother of the faithful, for he writes: "We must honor and obey the spiritual Mother, the holy Christian Church, the spiritual power, and what it commands, forbids, posits, orders, banishes, looses that we may do accordingly, also that we honor our earthly parents, fear and love them, likewise also the spiritual authority in all things which are not against the first three commandments."<sup>2</sup>

Calvin's view concerning the necessity of the church as a *Heilsanstalt* also may be found in the following passage of Luther's: "He who would find Christ must first find the Church. How should one know where Christ is and believe in Him, if one did not know where his believers were to be found? Hence, he who would know Christ must go to the Church . . . for outside the Christian Church there is no truth, no Christ, no salvation."<sup>3</sup>

## II. THE CRITIQUE OF PAUL WERNLE, RUDOLF SEEBERG, AND ARTHUR C. MCGIFFERT

Wernle, a New Testament scholar, has made much of Calvin's vacillating interpretation of the church, labeling his view as a

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<sup>1</sup> D. Ernst Rietschel, *Das Problem der unsichtbar-sichtbaren Kirche bei Luther*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe* VI, 255.

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

*Schweben zwischen Himmel und Erde*.<sup>4</sup> Seeberg, the dogmatic theologian, following mainly the strictures of Sohm against Calvin, has placed the center of gravity of Calvin's view of the church in the juridically organized and constituted church, a position which Seeberg considered quite inferior to that of Luther.<sup>5</sup> Arthur Cushman McGiffert has perhaps gone as far as any of these men in his critique of Calvin's view of the church, for he wrote, "Calvin's doctrine of the Church was a composite of many diverse and inconsistent elements, and, because of this, confusion concerning the meaning, place and purpose of the Church has since his day reigned almost everywhere in the reformed wing of Protestantism."<sup>6</sup>

The writer holds that, in the main, the above criticism has already been answered. Against Wernle and McGiffert, it might be said that wherever spiritual matters are at stake men are almost of necessity involved in paradoxes and tensions. Goethe, who surely was interested in living a full-orbed life in terms of humanistic classicism, was realistic enough to appreciate the ambiguities of existence when he penned the famous words, "Thoughts dwell close together, but matters jostle each other in space." It is one thing to think out with ruthless logic a certain ideal; it is quite another thing to realize it in practice. Calvin, too, was a realist and, while he constantly strove to realize his high church ideal and to obey the precepts of God, he was fully aware of the incompleteness of all human attainments. One has only to read Calvin's words of farewell to his friends while on his deathbed to understand his self-appraisal of his own work. He said,

I have had many faults which you have had to endure, and all that I have done is of no value. The wicked will seize upon that word, but I repeat that all that I have done is of no value, and that I am a miserable creature. But, if I may say so, I have meant well, my faults have always displeased me, and the root of the fear of God has been in my heart. You can say that the wish has been good; and I beg you that

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<sup>4</sup> Wernle, *op. cit.*, p. 56; also 55 ff, 360, 364, ("hanging between heaven and earth").

<sup>5</sup> Seeberg, *op. cit.*, 2, 610, 613. See Bohatec, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-277.

<sup>6</sup> "Calvin's Theory of the Church," p. 225, in *Essays in Modern Theology and Related Subjects*.

the ill be pardoned, but if there has been good in it that you will conform to it and follow it.<sup>7</sup>

In view of McGiffert's charge that, due to Calvin's inconsistent view of the church, confusion concerning the meaning, place, and purpose of the church has reigned almost everywhere in the Reformed wing of Protestantism, a rebuttal is in order. A careful study of the history of the churches of the reformed and Presbyterian order does not justify such a sweeping indictment. On the whole, the Reformed wing has been rather consistent in its striving for a well-ordered church life. The very fact that the churches of Calvin's persuasion survived in France despite fiercest persecution ought to make us cautious in being overly critical of what the Genevan reformer conceived the church to be. If it be pointed out that Puritanism caused not a little confusion in the matter pertaining to the right form of church polity, it must be kept in mind that Puritanism cannot be fully equated with Calvin's own thought, nor can the latter be made responsible for some of the internal confusions which at one time or another afflicted the Puritan movement. Since this movement developed within the bosom of the Church of England, though its early leaders had drunk deeply of the doctrine of Geneva, Puritanism represented a blending of several ideas. It is significant to recall that the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony did not at first separate themselves from the Church of England. Roger Williams discovered that fact to his dismay. However, it is true that both the Puritans of the Bay Colony as well as the Separatist Congregationalists of the Connecticut Valley were, in the main, true to Calvin's theology. They also shared with him the belief in a close interrelation between the church and the magistracy or the state.

McGiffert's assertion that Calvin trusted the saved man less than Luther is not easily proved. Luther, in fact, gave less authority to the saved man within the church than did Calvin.

### III. ERNST TROELTSCH'S COMPARISON

Ernst Troeltsch, in his revolutionary work *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, has tried to show that Calvin had

<sup>7</sup> Walker, *John Calvin, the Organizer of Reformed Protestantism*, p. 437.



a considerable affinity to the Anabaptists of his day. Not that the latter had exercised an historic influence upon Calvin's thought, but rather that both systems developed their church ideal from similar ethical and dogmatic presuppositions. Thus Troeltsch would see analogies between Calvin's and Anabaptist views concerning Christ, sanctification, and the law.

But Bohatec has proved and, I think, rather conclusively that Troeltsch has based his arguments mainly on secondary material and sources taken from Schneckenburger, Goebel, and Heppé.<sup>8</sup> Then again, he has been guilty of attributing to original Calvinism ideas that really belong to later developments within Protestantism. Moreover, a comparison between Calvin's views and those of the Anabaptists with regard to sanctification and perfection will reveal a deep contrast in understanding and interpretation. Calvin held to a relative perfectionism, while the Anabaptists advocated an absolute perfectionism. The latter believed that a holiness like that of the angels was attainable in this life. Hence, their plea for the separatist, holy church. Calvin knew that however much the follower of Christ might strive towards the ideal of perfect holiness, this ideal could not possibly be reached in *this* life. Our perfection, realized by faith, is in Christ, never in any moral, ethical or spiritual attainments of our own. Consequently, Calvin would not exclude those from the fellowship of the empirical church who fell far short of evangelical perfection.

With reference to the person of Christ, Calvin felt constrained to stress most emphatically the true human nature of Christ over against some of the enthusiasts who, with Menno Simons, were in danger of advocating a Docetic view of Christ. Simons seriously played with the idea that Christ had a celestial body, a conception which also troubled the Marcionites and the Manicheans of earlier centuries. Calvin, however, held that it was Christ's humanity which had been endowed with measureless gifts by the Heavenly Father and that, because of this fact, the members of his body participate in Christ's holiness and gifts of grace. On the other hand, Calvin taught that Christ, because of his infinite gifts, surpasses by far the members of his body, the church.

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<sup>8</sup> Bohatec, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

It might be argued, as Troeltsch has done, that Calvin seemed to have shared with the Anabaptists the view of Christ as a law-giver of the church. The charge has often been made that Calvin was one of the severest legalists of all time. Both Kampschulte and Wernle, the one a Catholic thinker and the other a Protestant scholar, have made that accusation. Reinhold Niebuhr, in his Gifford lectures, has spoken of the "moralism and legalism" by which Calvinistic reform was threatened and has suggested that "Puritanism may be regarded as the historic capitulation to this danger."<sup>9</sup> But Calvin, it seems to this observer, differs considerably from the Anabaptists in his appraisal of the law and of Christ as a lawgiver. The Anabaptists tended to read the Sermon on the Mount in literalistic fashion, holding that the true disciple who is possessed of the Holy Spirit will surely be able to fulfil its precepts. Calvin, while taking the most serious view of the holiness of the law, denied, nevertheless, not the ideal pattern of life set forth in the Sermon on the Mount but man's ability ever to realize it fully on earth. That the empirical church is ever in need of discipline precluded for Calvin the possibility of translating into practice the whole compass of God's will and law.

<sup>9</sup> *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, II, 198.

## *The Church in Its Empirical Expression*

CALVIN'S supreme concern was to honor God. Again and again he pointed out how grave and great a thing it is to be dedicated to God, to be surrendered to his will, so that as his obedient children men shall think, ponder, and do nothing but that which will redound to God's glory.<sup>1</sup> The church, as the corporate assembly of the New Testament covenant, must, through its empirical expression, seek to honor God in word and deed.

### I. HOLY WRIT, THE CHARTER AND NORM

It is in the Bible, the holy Word of God, that Calvin finds the charter of the church's freedom and the norm of its conduct. Among the letters of Paul he discovers in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians the ideal pattern of the church's form and substance. While God has made himself known to all men everywhere through the glory of the heavens and earth, holding forth to all, without exception, a mirror of his Deity in his works, he has added the light of his Word "in order that he might make himself known unto salvation."<sup>2</sup> To this Word, the church must turn for the direction of its thought, doctrine, and life. In his letter to Cardinal Sadoletto, Calvin, making an apostrophe to God, had written:

They charged me with two of the worst of crimes—heresy and schism. And the heresy was, that I dared to protest against dogmas which they received. But what could I have done? I heard from thy mouth that

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<sup>1</sup> *Corpus Reformatorum*, XXX, 505.

<sup>2</sup> *Institutes*, I, 1, 83.



there was no other light of truth which could direct our souls into the way of life, than that which was kindled by thy Word. I heard that whatever human minds of themselves conceive concerning thy Majesty, the worship of thy Deity, and the mysteries of thy religion, was vanity. I heard that their introducing into the Church instead of thy Word, doctrines sprung from the human brain, was sacrilegious presumption.<sup>3</sup>

To refute the learned sophistries of the doctors of Paris, Calvin wrote, "We ought, therefore, to stand fast in the doctrine in which we know that all the fulness of heavenly wisdom is included. On this very ground does Augustine decide that nothing not delivered in the Scriptures is necessary to salvation."<sup>4</sup>

## II. THE VISIBLE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

Calvin is in essential agreement with Luther concerning the visible marks of the church on earth. They are: the preaching and hearing of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments according to the institution of Christ.<sup>5</sup> To Sadoletto, as we remarked previously, the reformer pointed out four things (*notae, symbola*) as guaranteeing the safety of the church, namely, doctrine, discipline, sacraments, and useful ceremonies by which to exercise folk in offices of piety.<sup>6</sup> Where these "signs and badges," which the Lord has deemed sufficient to characterize his church,<sup>7</sup> are present, the church is truly found. People who revolt from the church so marked are deserters of religion, destroyers of the unity of Christ's body, and hence deserving "to be crushed by the full thunder of God's anger."<sup>8</sup>

## III. *Volkskirche* AND *Bekenntniskirche* IN CALVIN

What we have mentioned regarding the visible marks that distinguish the empirical church naturally involved Calvin's ad-

<sup>3</sup> Calvin's Tracts, I, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin's Tracts, I, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Loc. cit.*

vocacy of the idea of a *Volkskirche* in contrast to the Anabaptist idea of the gathered church of strict believers only. It is to be remembered that when Calvin began his work in Geneva in 1536 the reformatory movement had been under way for at least a year. Kampschulte writes, "Since the fall of 1535 Geneva was an Evangelical city. Catholic worship was no longer tolerated. Priests, monks, cathedral lords were in exile. In all Churches the preaching of the pure Word of God was heard. People imagined that since the days of the Apostles there had not been such a pure Church as that of Geneva."<sup>9</sup>

The whole city of Geneva, represented by the Little and Great Council, had espoused the Reformation cause. But, as Calvin soon was to discover to his dismay, while the old had been destroyed and the Papacy discomfited, there was little agreement as to what was to take its place. Thus, it was a foregone conclusion that on the basis of the *Volkskirche*, by means of an aggressive system of Christian nurture, the impulses of the evangelical faith were to be deepened in the Genevan populace, which had been terribly demoralized by the religious upheaval that had taken place.

Another reason why Calvin opposed the idea of the gathered church lay in his predestinationism. Since God only knows who are his own, it is presumptuous for men to determine with finality who is a true member of the church of Christ. Calvin, to be sure, aimed at leading his people in the way of holiness, but his fear of Anabaptist separatistic pride made him cautious. As Holl has put it:

The predestinarian faith did not mislead him to want to found a separatist Church of the elect. On the other hand he was not satisfied merely to preach to the congregation, leaving it to its whim what it should do with the Word it had heard. The theological determination of his idea of God and the ideal of perfection that derived from it made him envision the goal to which he should strive more sharply than Luther. If every believer is to become a conscious, active instrument of God, the order of the Church had to be constructed accordingly. That led him to heighten the standard of the *Volkskirche* by

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<sup>9</sup> Kampschulte, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

joining with it the ideal of the *Bekenntniskirche* (Confessional Church).<sup>10</sup>

The fact that Calvin like Luther accepted the doctrine of infant baptism as a distinct, God-ordained sacrament, interpreted in analogy of Old Testament circumcision, also explains why he should have been in favor of a *Volkskirche*. But, here again, Calvin would not allow those who had once been baptized (when still under Rome's spiritual control) to rest on this "experience," but he urged them to make their salvation sure by realizing the implications of their baptismal vows.

Ernst Troeltsch, in his contention that Calvin was closer to the Anabaptist ideal of the pure church than the reformer himself was willing to admit, has pointed out how Calvin from the start of his Genevan reform pressed (*reizt*) toward "the gathering of genuine Christians." This is, no doubt, true, for as early as 1536 Calvin tried to induce the Genevans to swear publicly to their faith, the avowed purpose being to bring about a clear cut decision in favor of the evangelical faith. Here again, as with Luther, one may speak of certain incongruities in Calvin's thought concerning the church. But granting that point, Calvin's insistence that the *Volkskirche* through catechetical instruction, constant preaching of the Word, confirmation and pastoral care be developed into something approximating the New Testament ideal, does not mean that he on that account surrendered his opposition to the Anabaptist idea "that the Church of God is holy."<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. THE CHURCH MUST BE WELL-ORDERED

Calvin's theocentric outlook, his high regard for the normative character of Holy Writ, his juridical training and organizational talent, all these predisposed him towards *une église bien ordonnée*. But even if he had not been as deeply given to law and order, the conditions he found when he first went to Geneva in 1536 would have almost inevitably led him in the direction of a more thorough reform. Later, Calvin would write, reminiscing about the disturbed situation in evangelical Geneva, "When I first came to

<sup>10</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, p. 266 (*Ges. Aufs.* III).

<sup>11</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 25-26.



this Church, there was almost nothing. Preaching went on, but that was all. One did indeed look for idols and destroyed them. But there was no thought of reform. Everything was in confusion."<sup>12</sup>

It is known how Calvin and Farel labored with great zeal and determination during 1536 and 1537 in order to realize the ideal of a well-ordered church. Calvin, soon after his arrival in Geneva, composed an evangelical catechism, which was really an excerpt from his *Institutes*, intended for children, although really more suited to adults for autodidactic purposes. Enamored as Calvin was with the idea of sound doctrine, he induced Farel to issue a statement of doctrine contained in twenty-one articles which was to be accepted as basic by the Genevans and act as a barrier against innovators trying to spread false doctrines or renew the idolatries of Rome. This was the *Confession de la Foy laquelle tous bourgeois et habitans de Genève et subjectz du pays doivent jurer de garder et tenir*. That Calvin was the one who had an active share in the composition of this confession can not be doubted.

When the two reformers first presented this confession to the Council of Geneva they also submitted a proposal concerning the future organization of the Genevan church.<sup>13</sup> In the main, this memorandum expounded the means which the reformers deemed necessary for carrying the uncompleted reform to its effectual consummation. The instruction of the young, the strict administration of discipline, the need of doing away with the papal marriage laws, the use of psalmody in the cult, and, most of all, the regular and dignified celebration of the Lord's Supper, were the matters which Calvin and his associates urged upon the city fathers of Geneva to carry through. In order to make possible a worthy celebration of the Lord's Supper, the Little Council, the chief bearer of authority in Geneva at this time, was asked to elect dependable, pious, and honest men from the citizenry to act as supervisors of morals in their given districts. Their duty was to admonish those who in any way violated the moral sanctions that were then valid in reformed Geneva. If people refused to accept such admonition

<sup>12</sup> *Lettres françaises*, II, 574, (quoted by Kampschulte, *op. cit.*, p. 284, *fn.*).

<sup>13</sup> "Memoire de Calvin et Farel sur l'organisation de l'Eglise de Geneve," see *Opera* Xa, 5-14.

they were to be reported to the preachers, *la Vénérable Compagnie*, and if the latter's words of admonition availed not, then excommunication was to be pronounced against the recalcitrants. The excommunicated church member was to be summarily dealt with by the civil government should he presume to criticize or mock the dicta of the preachers and the church.

Although the civil rulers of Geneva at first co-operated to the best of their ability with Calvin, opposition soon arose. Crypto-Catholics, some of them belonging to prominent families, and the so-called Libertines, as well as partisans of Farel like Ami Porral and others, opposed the strict discipline which Calvin sought to impose upon their city. When on January 4, 1538, the Council of Two Hundred voted "that the Supper be refused to no one," thus offering a direct affront to Calvin and Farel who had vehemently insisted upon the exclusive right of the church and its clergy to determine admission to or exclusion from the Lord's Supper, the opposition took on serious character. A few months later, on April 22, 1538, the Council ordered Calvin and Farel to leave the city of Geneva within three days. Thus ended Calvin's first attempt to put into practice his high church ideal.

But when Calvin, at the urgent request of Geneva, returned to the place of his former defeat, he started exactly where he had left off in 1538. Thus, we find this indomitable man, three years and four months after his expulsion, at once going to work on the *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques*. These *Ordonnances*, a set of articles based on those of 1537, were to be the charter of Geneva's ecclesiastical executive and judicial system. They were adopted on November 20, 1541, by the civil authorities of Geneva, though with minor modifications. Georgia Harkness has well defined the meaning of these *Ordonnances* in this manner:

The *Ordonnances* had two main objects: to define more precisely than before the duties of church officials and the relation of their powers to those of the civil rulers; and to establish a new ecclesiastical body, the Consistory, to represent the church explicitly in its guardianship of faith and morals. Calvin hoped thus to give the church a workable executive organization and avoid further dispute over jurisdiction.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *the Man and His Ethics*, p. 24.

## V. THE LARGE IMPORTANCE OF THE MINISTRY

The *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* of 1541 open with this significant and normative statement bearing on a four-fold ministry: "There are four offices which our Lord has instituted for the government of his church. First, the pastors, then the doctors, then the elders, fourthly the deacons. If therefore we desire to have a well-ordered church and wish to maintain it in its entirety, we must observe this form of polity."<sup>15</sup>

As we compare Calvin's formulation of this four-fold ministry in his *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* with the requirements laid down in the *Institutes*, particularly the 1543 edition, we find a similar outline. Book IV, chapters III to V, deal particularly with the purpose, function, and election of the ministry, and the corruptions of the primitive church pattern and that of the church fathers through the papacy. On the basis of 1 Corinthians and Ephesians 4, Calvin develops his understanding of what constitutes a legitimate and scriptural form of the ministry of the Word. While Paul speaks of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers—that is, five offices—Calvin holds that of these five only two have come down to us. However, he does not deny that "afterward God occasionally raised up Apostles, or at least Evangelists, in their stead, as has been done in our time. For such were needed to bring back the Church from the revolt of Antichrist."<sup>16</sup> But, the office of apostle is an extraordinary one, issuing out of a direct mandate from God himself, and, therefore, "it has no place in churches duly constituted."<sup>17</sup> There remain, Calvin concludes, two chief offices, that is, pastors and teachers, "with whom the Church never can dispense."<sup>18</sup> Teachers differ from pastors in that the former are limited to the interpretation of Scripture only. By asserting that the functions of both teacher and pastor "are all embraced in the pastoral office,"<sup>19</sup> Calvin really made the ministry of the Word all important.

<sup>15</sup> Kidd, *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation*, pp. 590-1.

<sup>16</sup> *Institutes*, II., IV, 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>18</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 62.



But there are four offices listed in the *Ordonnances*. From where does Calvin derive the two additional offices? The answer is not difficult to discover. Reading in 1 Corinthians 12: 28 f. and Romans 12: 7 f. of "powers, gifts of healing, helps, governments . . . or the care of the poor" Calvin, discarding all but two as temporary in nature, retains two as permanent, namely, government and the care of the poor.

In the *Institutes* we read as follows:

But there are two of perpetual duration, viz., government and care of the poor. By these governors I understand seniors selected from the people to unite with the bishops in pronouncing censures and exercising discipline. For this is the only meaning which can be given to the passage, "He that ruleth, with diligence," (Rom. XII: 8). From the beginning, therefore, each church had its senate, (Lat. *senatum*, French, conseil ou consistoire) composed of pious, grave, and venerable men, in whom was lodged the power of correcting faults.<sup>20</sup>

The deacons, in turn, according to the Acts 6: 3 are the "stewards of the public treasury of the poor"<sup>21</sup> and consequently, Calvin argues, "such deacons as the Apostolic Church had, it becomes us to have after their example."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, on the basis both of the *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* and the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* we find that Calvin argues in favor of the four-fold ministry, perpetual in the church until her final consummation, given for her edification in love, grace, and knowledge of Christ: pastors, teachers, governors or elders, and deacons.

Inasmuch as the *Ministerium Verbi* assumes an all-important place in Calvin's system of church government, we ought to inquire briefly as to the dignity, function, calling, and ordination of the ministry.

The very titles, descriptive and definitive, which Scripture gives to the preachers of the Word, lead Calvin to speak in the highest terms of the dignity of their office. A few of these titles may indicate his view on the matter. Thus, he speaks of ministers as Christ's substitutes or *Lieutenans*, as interpreters of his secret will, as the

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Loc. cit.*

ministry of righteousness and eternal life, or, in the case of the apostles, prototypes of all faithful pastors, as the first architects of the church.<sup>23</sup>

That God has deigned to make men his mouthpieces is an expression of his grace. Had he chosen to speak to us directly we might all have received his oracles without delay. But now that the God of all wonders has called men of flesh and blood and of our own limitations to minister to us the secrets of his will, we may "give best proof of our piety and obedience, by listening with docility to his servant, though not in any respect our superior."<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, God has clothed the ministry of the Word with a dignity all its own, since his word says that "*he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ . . .*" (Eph. 4: 11-13). The divine institution of the ministry is, according to Calvin, "the principal bond by which believers are kept together in one body."<sup>25</sup> He who would undermine this God-given office "plots the devastation, or rather the ruin and destruction, of the Church. For neither are the light and heat of the sun, nor meat and drink, so necessary to sustain and cherish the present life, as is the apostolical and pastoral office to preserve a Church in the earth."<sup>26</sup>

As to the function of the herald of God's Word, not much need be added. According to the *Ordonnances* pastors are enjoined as follows: "As to the pastors which Scripture sometimes also calls elders or ministers it must be said that it is their office to declare the Word of God in order to indoctrinate, admonish, exhort both publicly and privately, administer the sacraments and care for brotherly corrections with the elders."<sup>27</sup>

The importance and dignity of this ministerial office forbids that

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<sup>23</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 57, 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> Kidd, *op. cit.*, p. 591.

men assume its responsibilities without due call. "Nul ne se doit ingérer en cest office sans vocation."<sup>28</sup> This stricture must be carefully observed, "lest restless and turbulent men should presumptuously push themselves forward to teach or rule."<sup>29</sup> He who would, therefore, become a true minister of the church, must first be duly called; and, second, he must answer to his calling; that is, he must undertake and execute the office assigned to him.<sup>30</sup>

Since the office of the ministry is higher than even the royal office of a king, and Satan is ever eager to make God's servants contemptible in the eyes of the world, Calvin surrounds the calling of pastors with proper safeguards. Here, as Hans Hausherr has pointed out, it is pertinent to observe the procedure laid down in the first edition of the *Institutes* and that of 1543. In the former, two or three bishops or pastors are to advise concerning the one who is to be called. Whether a bishop or pastor is chosen by means of a church election or through an especially elected college of the clergy or through the civil authorities depends upon circumstances of time and place. But since, according to Calvin, many heads make for confusion, he thinks it best to leave the election of a pastor either to a college of elders or to the magistrates. In the 1543 edition of the *Institutes*, however, we notice a somewhat different approach. Here, Calvin proves from the New Testament that the legitimate calling of pastors ought to take place through the suffrage of the church. To avoid disorder, the election as such ought to be conducted by outside pastors. Thus, we read: "We see then that ministers are legitimately called according to the Word of God, when those who may have seemed fit are elected on the consent and approbation of the people. Other pastors, however, ought to preside over the election, lest any error should be committed by the general body either through levity, or bad passion, or tumult."<sup>31</sup> Calvin, evidently reflecting his misgivings and experiences during his first stay in Geneva, is none too eager to consult the civil magistrates or even a lay college of elders. He is anxious, therefore, that the "common right and liberty of the

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<sup>28</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Institutes*, II iv, 66.

<sup>30</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, 71.



Church" be not infringed. Hausherr has well said "Calvin has become much more skeptical towards secular authority; he is absolutely determined to prevent it from exclusively deciding in matters that are crucially important to the Church."<sup>32</sup>

The *Ordonnances* of 1541 contain (though composed two years prior to the edition of the *Institutes* referred to above) essentially the same procedure as to the election of pastors. We read there:

It will be good at this point to follow the order of the ancient Church in view of the fact that Holy Writ enjoins this practice, that is, that the ministers first elect him who is to be put in office. Then he is to be presented to the Council. If he is found worthy and received and accepted by it, then let him be presented with proper endorsement to the church people during the preaching service, so that he may be received by the common consent of the company of the faithful. If he is found unworthy, which must be shown in a legitimate manner, a new election must be held in order to chose another man.<sup>33</sup>

The co-operation of the church is definitely envisaged, though seriously hedged about by various restraints. The real decision in the election of pastors came eventually to lie with a select body of people, with the ministry having a decisive vote in the matter. Clergy and Council had really to agree on a given candidate in order to insure his election. Calvin himself, who played such a dominant role in both the ecclesiastical and civil affairs of the city of Geneva, never proposed a candidate, though he might have thought him worthy enough, unless he was sure of his being acceptable to the Council. Consequently, every candidate whom he proposed to the Council was accepted by it. Hausherr has aptly described Calvin's diplomatic acumen in these words: "Not even wanting to do the impossible in order the more certainly to attain the possible, that is the secret of diplomacy to which Calvin, too, owed his successes."<sup>34</sup>

A word must be said concerning the ordination of pastors in Calvin's church. Scriptural simplicity in the manner of ordaining candidates for the ministerial office was Calvin's suggestion. The imposition of hands had the sanction of the early church, but many

<sup>32</sup> Hausherr, *Der Staat in Calvin's Gedankenwelt*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>33</sup> Kidd, *op. cit.*, pp. 591-592.

<sup>34</sup> Hausherr, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

superstitions had been connected with it, and, hence, it was better left out. Instead, one of the pastors gave a discourse about the meaning and duties of the office of a pastor. After prayers the candidate had to swear *entre les mains de la Seigneurie*, that is, of the Syndics and the Council, promising to serve God faithfully, preach his Word, edify the church, admonish the erring ones without fear or favor, seek the welfare of both Council and city, but supremely to yield to God an undivided allegiance.

Once called, the pastor enjoyed a position of eminent leadership. As the vicar of Christ on earth, he was the administrator of holy mysteries and, therefore, had a claim to highest honor and confidence, not merely for his own sake, but for God's sake in whose name he spoke and ministered. Those who denied the dutiful minister of God the honor that was due him incurred the wrath of God and should not escape just punishment. The preacher, in turn, should be a lover of God's people, a student of the Word, sound in doctrine, holy and circumspect in life, faithful to the regulations of the *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* and to his vows, ever vigilant against the wiles of error and the papacy, an example to the flock, modest and given to reconciliation, without avarice or vain ambition, and ever solicitous for the spiritual welfare of his flock. A high ideal indeed!

## VI. RELATION BETWEEN CONGREGATION AND MINISTRY

In the foregoing we have already touched on one phase of this problem. While it is true that Calvin had a wholesome fear of the explosive powers of the masses and while he leaned both in ecclesiastical as well as civil government towards an aristocratic-democratic form of polity, that is, a careful system of checks and balances of power, he nevertheless did much to encourage the development of self-reliant and self-governing congregations within the Reformed wing of Protestantism. The Catholic historian Kampschulte, while trying to convince his readers that much of Calvin's system tended towards the hated Catholic ideal, had yet to admit that by placing the Bible into the hands of every believer as the only and ultimate norm of faith and practice, Calvin gave the individual a significance "which of necessity leads to a

democratic conception and development of the entire ecclesiastical system.”<sup>35</sup> This fact explains why the Reformed churches of Catholic France or the diaspora churches in the Rhinelands, an overwhelmingly Catholic domain, were able to survive the storms of persecution and the fiercest trial of their faith.

## VII. THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

Our discussion of Calvin’s view of the church in its empirical expression, it seems to this writer, points at every turn to the need of discipline in order to realize the Genevan reformer’s ideal of a well-ordered church. In fact, what we have thus far discussed under the last six headings is integrally related to the problem of discipline. The latter is not an isolated factor in the church’s life, but closely interwoven with and related to its very purpose, a purpose that is to express the reign of God among the redeemed. But in order that God’s glory be revealed and realized in the church, it is absolutely necessary, according to Calvin’s canons of thinking, that every aspect of the church’s life and practice come under the continual discipline of God’s truth. That truth, as we must be by now fully aware, is contained in the holy Scriptures, God’s revealed Word, and it is constantly brought home to the spirit of the believer by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

It is in the *Institutes* of 1543 that we find the dogmatic basis for Calvin’s principles of church discipline. His commentary on I Corinthians is also a valuable source of information on this matter. Many of his other exegetical works contain references to this or that aspect of church discipline. Besides these, the polemical tracts against the papacy deserve attention.

In speaking of the necessity of discipline in the church, Calvin avows that just as no “house with even a moderate family can be kept in a right state without discipline,” even so must the church have a sound discipline if it is to endure and render the most effective ministry among men. In fact, discipline in the church is much more necessary, since her “state ought to be the best ordered possible.”<sup>36</sup> Those who are opposed to discipline are unreasonable

<sup>35</sup> Kampschulte, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

<sup>36</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 248.



people who aim "at the complete devastation of the Church."<sup>37</sup> What sinews are to the body, that discipline is to the church. Calvin describes its need and purpose in this fashion: "Discipline, therefore, is a kind of curb to restrain and tame those who war against the doctrine of Christ, or it is a kind of stimulus by which the indifferent are aroused, sometimes also, it is a kind of fatherly rod, by which those who have made some more grievous lapse are chastized in mercy with the meekness of the spirit of Christ."<sup>38</sup>

A little further on in the text of the *Institutes* Calvin speaks of the purpose of church discipline as being threefold: firstly, "that God may not be insulted by the name of Christians being given to those who lead shameful and flagitious lives, as if the Church were a combination of the wicked and abandoned";<sup>39</sup> secondly, "that the good may not, as usually happens, be corrupted by constant communication with the wicked. For such is our proneness to go astray, that nothing is easier than to seduce us from the right course by bad example";<sup>40</sup> thirdly, "that the sinner may be ashamed, and begin to repent of his turpitude. Hence it is for their interest also that their iniquity should be chastized, that whereas they would have become more obstinate by indulgence, they may be aroused by the rod."<sup>41</sup> In other words, the purpose of church discipline is to preserve the moral and spiritual integrity of the church, lest its doctrine and, particularly, the Lord's Supper be desecrated. Of the latter point Calvin makes much when discussing both the necessity and the purpose of such discipline.

The measures to be used vary according to circumstances and the nature of the offense involved. Distinction must be made between private and public sins, between secret and openly committed sins. Where mere delinquencies are in question it suffices to use the means of verbal admonition or rebuke. However, in the case of flagrant sins such as adultery, fornication, thievery, robbery, sedition, perjury, false witness, and the like "sharper remedies" are in order. Calvin, speaking of disciplinary action towards such flagrant sinners who have openly brought shame and disgrace

<sup>37</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, 250.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 251.

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 251-252.

upon Christ and his church, writes, "It is not sufficient verbally to rebuke him who, by some open act of evil example, has grievously offended the Church; but he ought for a time to be denied the communion of the Supper, until he gives proof of repentance."<sup>42</sup>

Calvin, in order to elucidate this point, makes reference to Paul's action against the incestuous member of the church at Corinth as recorded in 1 Corinthians 5: 5. The apostle, in that passage, rebukes the church for not having acted sooner and with resolute purpose against the blatant sinner in their midst. The offending member ought to have been banished long ago. Commenting on this passage, Calvin concludes:

Hence, too, it appears that Churches are furnished with this power—that, whatever fault there is within them, they can correct or remove it by strictness of discipline, and that those are inexcusable that are not on the alert to have filth cleared away. For Paul here condemns the Corinthians. Why? Because they have been remiss in the punishment of one individual. But he would have accused them unjustly, if they had not had this power. Hence the power of excommunication is established from this passage. On the other hand, as Churches have this mode of punishment put in their hands, those commit sin, as Paul shows here, that do not make use of it, when it is required.<sup>43</sup>

Calvin's high regard for the crown rights of the Redeemer and his sense of equity naturally led him to enjoin a discipline without respect of persons. High and low, rich and poor, were to be dealt with on terms of equal justice and severity. Kings and princes, Calvin averred, "should not think it a disgrace to them to prostrate themselves suppliantly before Christ, the King of kings; nor ought they to be displeased at being judged by the Church. For seeing they seldom hear anything in their courts but mere flattery, the more necessary is it that the Lord should correct them by the mouth of his priests. Nay, they ought rather to wish the priests not to spare them, in order that the Lord may spare."<sup>44</sup>

But whatever censure the church wishes to make, whether by

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<sup>42</sup> *Op. cit.*, 252–253.

<sup>43</sup> *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, pp. 181–182.

<sup>44</sup> *Loc. cit.*

admonition or rebuke under four eyes for milder delinquencies, or whether by public chastisement of a wayward offender, all, Calvin pleads, ought to be done "with the spirit of meekness." The ultimate object of all censure and discipline and excommunication—its last resort—ought to be to lead the sinner to repentance and back into the fold of the church. Therefore Calvin finds fault with the ancient church of the fathers because of its undue severity by which it compelled some of the excluded members to remain for three, four, or seven years, or even a whole lifetime, outside the bounds of church fellowship. To despair of the restoration of those who have been excommunicated or to give them up finally as lost is not within the province or authority of the church. Only the Lord has power to exercise that final and ultimate judgment. The church's sacred duty is ever to be solicitous for the recovery of those who have grievously erred and to plead earnestly for them in the prayer of intercession to God. All church discipline, therefore, is only temporal in character.

It ought to be noted in this connection that Calvin underscored the necessity of the congregation and the elders acting in unison in carrying out the disciplinary functions of the church. Here again, as in the election of pastors, the congregation has more of an advisory than a regulatory role. Calvin writes on the passage 1 Corinthians 5: 4:

It is to be carefully observed, that Paul, though an Apostle, does not himself, as an individual, excommunicate according to his own pleasure, but consults with the Church, that the matter may be transacted by common authority. He, it is true, takes the lead, and shows the way, but, in taking others as his associates, he intimates with sufficient plainness, that this authority does not belong to any one individual. As, however, a multitude never accomplishes anything with moderation, or seriousness, if not governed by counsel, there was appointed in the ancient Church a Presbytery, that is, an assembly of elders, who, by the consent of all, had the power of first judging in the case. From them the matter was brought before the people, but it was as a thing already judged.<sup>45</sup>

The passage in the *Institutes* bearing on this point enjoins essentially the same procedure. There the elders are warned lest they

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 182-183.



act alone, apart from others, that is, the congregation. They are told to act only "with the knowledge and approbation of the Church, so that the body of the people, without regulating the procedure, may, as witnesses and guardians, observe it, and prevent the few from doing any thing capriciously."<sup>46</sup>

This limitation upon the authority of the elders, Calvin held, is to prevent the development of tyranny with its utter disregard of the mandate and commandment of Christ. The worst that can happen in any Christian church is to entrust discipline into the hands of one man. The procedure of carrying out an act of excommunication, for instance, ought to be carried out with due decorum and solemnity. The church is to engage in this sad, though necessary, duty in the sight of God, for in a well-ordered church it is Christ himself who is presiding over his own tribunal.

A word needs to be said with reference to the nature of the jurisdiction which the church is to exercise in enforcing its discipline. Calvin strongly emphasized the exclusively spiritual character of church jurisdiction. Consequently, he severely criticized the whole tenor and direction of papal jurisdiction. Not only have bishops usurped to themselves what originally was given to the whole church and, in addition, suppressed and discarded the consistory "ordained of the Spirit of God," but they have, through the Roman pontiff, appropriated the civil jurisdiction which by God's decree belongs to the magistrate. This evil became even worse when the bishops turned over the authority thus usurped to people who "differed in no respect from civil judges." Calvin describes this development in this manner: "At length, the Roman pontiff, not content with moderate districts, laid hands first on kingdoms, and thereafter on empire. And that he may on some pretext or other retain possession, secured by mere robbery, he boasts at one time that he holds it by divine right, at another he pretends a donation from Constantine, at another, some different title."<sup>47</sup>

With St. Bernard of Clairvaux, John Calvin denies the apostolic right of the papal claims to the right of the sword (*ius gladii*). He denies it also from the point of view of human law. The papal legislative and executive jurisdiction is neither *de iure divino* nor *de*

<sup>46</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 254.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

*iure humano*. Whatever jurisdiction the church exercises can only be spiritual in character. For thus Christ intended it to be (Luke 12: 14; 20: 25-26; 22: 25-26; 2 Cor. 10: 4-6).

It is of interest to note that Calvin and Luther agreed in their denial of the *potestas ecclesiastica* of the pope. However, Luther and the Lutheran creeds denied its validity merely from the point of view of the divine law, while they were willing to allow for the *ius gladii* of the pope from that of the human law. This fact, as Bohatec informs us, was due to many canonical privileges and immunities of the German spiritual princes and to the connection, rooted in the law of the empire, between the territorial powers and the episcopal authorities.<sup>48</sup> Calvin, however, would not admit even this reason. To him, the papal claim to both secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction was clearly in violation of the Word of God. He wrote:

If in this matter we seek the authority of Christ, there can be no doubt that he intended to debar the ministers of his Word from civil domination and worldly power when he said, "The princes of the Gentiles exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you," (Matth. 20: 25, 26). For he intimates not only that the office of pastor is distinct from the office of the prince, but that the things differ so widely that they cannot be united in the same individual.<sup>49</sup>

Again, in the same context, pointing to the refusal of Christ to act as a judge or divider in matters of inheritance, Calvin declares that our Master "unreservedly refuses the office of judging; and this he would not have done if the thing had been in accordance with his office. To the subordination to which the Lord thus reduced himself, will his servants not submit?"<sup>50</sup>

In view of this attitude, Calvin held that "the severest punishment of the Church, and, as it were, her last thunderbolt, is excommunication, which, however, is not to be used unless in cases of grave necessity. This, moreover, requires neither violence nor

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<sup>48</sup> Bohatec, *op. cit.*, p. 541. Compare with Augsburg Confession, ARTICLE VII: "If so be that the Bishops have any power of the sword, they have it not as Bishops by the commandment of the Gospel, but by man's law given unto them of kings and emperors, for the civil government of their goods."

<sup>49</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 237-238.

physical force, but is content with the might of the Word of God." In short, the jurisdiction of the ancient church was nothing else, "if I may so speak, than a practical declaration of what Paul teaches concerning the spiritual power of pastors."<sup>51</sup> This "spiritual power of pastors," according to Calvin, entailed the right to summon those "who are to be privately admonished or sharply rebuked, a right, moreover, of keeping back from the communion of the Lord's Supper those who cannot be admitted without profaning this high ordinance."<sup>52</sup>

Sohm, the eminent student of church law, has advanced a rather critical view with regard to Calvin's church discipline. According to this scholar, Calvin's *potestas ecclesiastica* is no true spiritual power but represents a juridical, that is, from Sohm's point of view, worldly power. Sohm charges Calvin and the Reformed churches with having enslaved the church once again in the shackles of a juridical legislation, thus reverting back to the Catholic and medieval pattern.

What are the reasons which Sohm adduces in order to prove his thesis? First of all, he points to the fact that Calvin considered the church's jurisdiction to be the continuation of that of the Jewish Sanhedrin. That is true as far as it goes. Now Sohm affirms that the Sanhedrin's jurisdiction was strictly juridical, that is, secular in nature. But in Calvin's eyes it was not a secular, nor mere human institution, but had its origin directly in God. When Christ gave the early church the power of the keys, he really gave nothing new but merely confirmed the spiritual jurisdiction which had in former times been given to the people of Israel.

But is Sohm justified in denying that Calvin held the power of the keys to be a pastoral office? By no means! Calvin conceived this power to be part of the administration of the Word of God. And, as we have already noted above, to Calvin the jurisdiction of the church was a spiritual jurisdiction, having nothing whatever to do with physical coercion. Yet Sohm, despite the evidence to the contrary, nevertheless ardently defended his critical strictures against Calvin's view of church discipline, laboring under the bias that any discipline which the church, as a corporate body,

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>52</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 234.



exercises for the maintenance of its own order is a secular type of jurisdiction. Sohm sees the coercive element in Calvin's discipline, not in the help which the state lent the church in enforcing that discipline but in the fact that the church used means, such as the ban of excommunication, with which to maintain its own integrity. That, Sohm avowed, was no longer the exercise of pastoral oversight and concern, but coercion pure and simple.

That the Consistory of the Genevan churches came eventually to be a semi-ecclesiastical and semi-civil body, while to be regretted perhaps, was not in Calvin's plan or intention. That was largely due to the tenacity with which the city councils of the sixteenth century fought for their old established rights and prerogatives. It is well known that Calvin fought long and hard for the exclusive right of the church of Geneva to administer the right of excommunication without interference from the civil authorities. But it was only after 1555, after the Bertholier case had finally been settled to the satisfaction of Calvin, that this right of the church became firmly established. E. F. Karl Müller has described the complexity of the actual working out of Calvin's ideal of church discipline as follows:

In theory it remained true what the deliberations of Calvin's proposal added: that the ministers have no civil jurisdiction and only use the spiritual sword of the Word of God. But in practice there resulted, at least for our modern understanding, an intolerable mixture of ecclesiastical and political power. The *anciens* (elders) were at the same time subservient to the *seigneurie* (secular authority). Frequently the Church prepared the preliminary investigation for the civil court, and the magistrates lent the Christian Church their secular arm. But if we are to be just in our historical judgment we must, however, consider that this mixture did not issue from Calvin's peculiar ecclesiastical theories, but from the general views of the times which could not conceive the co-existence of several Churches in a more or less neutral State. That Calvin despite the paralyzing tendency of that view did not allow the Evangelical Church to disappear or to be absorbed into the State, is to his credit. Protestantism is indebted to his energy and persuasive powers which made possible an autonomous Church that was both well organized and disciplined.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> "Kirchenzucht in der reformierten Kirche," *Realencyclopædie fuer protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, X, 488-489.

Sohm vainly tried to distinguish in Calvin's thinking between the power of the keys of the pastors which, he avers, serves strictly pastoral purposes, and the power of the keys of the church, which serves disciplinary objectives. The latter creates a type of jurisdiction which, as we have seen, Sohm interprets as denoting juridical, that is, secular authority. But this distinction, while present in Calvin's thinking, has, it seems, been overdrawn by Sohm. According to both Luther and Calvin the preachers administer both the Word of God and the discipline of the church. In the final analysis, the power of the keys which pastors exercise is the power of the church as such. In Calvin's church, as I understand it, the pastors function not, as Sohm maintains, in their capacity of elders but always in their capacity of pastors, that is, as the spiritual experts of the doctrine of the church and as guardians of the church's integrity and order.

One more question: Does not the severity of discipline in Calvin's church in Geneva support Sohm's contentions? It is undoubtedly true that in this matter we moderns tend to register our strongest objections to the whole tenor of Calvin's work and discipline. But we must seek to understand Calvin's endeavors in this direction in the light of the times, and even more so in the light of his consuming passion for God's honor. Moreover, the Protestant movement, as both Catholic and Protestant historians have observed, tended at first to create considerable confusion and disorderliness within the area of its influence. And it is Calvin's distinctive contribution to have erected an effective dam against the dissolution of morals that threatened the Europe of his day, a dissolution of morals that had been tremendously furthered by the evil tendencies in Catholic Renaissance circles and tendencies deep within the bosom of the Catholic Church itself, as Ludwig von Pastor, famous Catholic historian of the papacy, has admitted. Calvin proved to the severest critics of the reformatory movement that Protestantism was capable of creating new centers of spiritual and moral power and progress. In the Calvinistic churches under the cross, particularly among the Huguenots of France, a very high ideal of moral integrity and spiritual vigor was attained.

Sohm and Calvin, as Bohatec has said, might well have agreed

that in principle the power of the church must be a spiritual power, but Sohm's assertion that such power could only be expressed in an invisible church does not carry conviction. For the orders of God can only become articulate in the concrete forms of this world, hence only a society capable of creating such a form can attempt to express the purpose of these orders in time. Calvin, at least, was thinking strongly in corporate terms, though he realized that a well-ordered church may at best only approximate God's ideal, for full realization is precluded here on earth by the sin that remains even in the lives of God's redeemed people. Bohatec may well sum up for us the deeper intentions of Calvin and his view of church discipline. He says:

With his zeal for an "ordered and soundly constituted Church" (*église bien réglée et policée*), with his soberness with which he tried to realize the ideal of a pure Church within the attainable possibilities and with which he tried gradually to transform the *Volkskirche* (in which the civil and Church community are identical) into a Confessional Church, with his realism and the pedagogical tact of the pastor with which he tried to lead the weakest to the heights of achievement, and by joining the institutional idea with the organismic idea which, as we have noted, is bound up with the principle of the impossibility of resolving the tensions between the empirical and the essential Church, —through all these means Calvin, humanly speaking, saved Protestantism.<sup>54</sup>

### VIII. THE CHURCH AND STATE IN THEIR INTERRELATEDNESS

It is significant to note that the new church order—that is, the Ecclesiastical Regulations (*Ordonnances ecclésiastiques*) of the year 1541—was issued in the name of the syndics and the Little and the Great Council. Perhaps nowhere, as Kampschulte has wisely suggested, have church and state influenced each other as much as in Calvin's Geneva. Yet despite their co-operative relationships, the two spheres were, theoretically at least, to be sharply and cleanly distinguished. While in German territories the church often became nothing more than the servile handmaiden of the respective rulers due to the introduction of the territorial regime,

<sup>54</sup> Bohatec, *op. cit.*, p. 576.



Calvin manfully and against much opposition fought for the independence of the church towards the state. The venerable company of Calvin's clergy insisted on freedom to teach the Word of God and to enforce the discipline of the church without interference from the secular authorities. However, since the *Consistoire* was a semi-civil and semi-ecclesiastical body, the balancing of these two authorities was not always nor easily achieved. Only after 1555 did Calvin become the master of the situation in Geneva and begin to wield an uncontested authority within his church-state. The Catholic historian Kampschulte has excellently summed up the problem of the interrelationship between Calvin's church and the Genevan state in this fashion:

As the Church, in appearance at least, subjected itself to the State, it really functioned as the real master. It leaves to the State the external honors and titles and the pretense of being in the saddle, but in return for its apparent subjection it secures its very essence. It is the Church which gives to the life of the State its character, its color and tenor, its contents and its goal.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Kampschulte, *op. cit.*, p. 475.

## *The State as Divinely Instituted*

IF ONE would rightly appraise Calvin's view of the state one ought constantly keep in mind that our modern idea of the state as an autonomous entity was foreign to the Genevan reformer.<sup>1</sup> Basically, Calvin like Luther still thought in terms of the *corpus christianum*. The church and the state are both subject to the sovereign rule of God, the *regnum Dei et Christi*. The authority of both spheres inheres in the will and purpose of the living God.

Again, it is to be noted that Calvin's primary interest lay in the establishment and safeguarding of the freedom of the church. Only secondarily did he concern himself about the interest of the state. He was primarily an ecclesiastical statesman. While he frequently considered the nature and function of the state, Calvin did not write a single tract that dealt exclusively with it. But wherever Calvin dealt with matters relating to it he was more concerned with existing, concrete institutions of given states than with their theoretical motivation. The word most often used by Calvin to designate the state is *politia*. But that word, as Hausherr has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> does not, by far, cover all the things which we conceive as belonging to the nature and function of a *modern* state. It relates primarily to the constitution of a state. In its most general sense this word *politia* denotes juridical order, *Rechtsordnung*. Other words which Calvin uses to describe the state are *magistratus*, *praefectus* and *praefectura*, *res publica* and *princeps*. The word *status* does not yet have our modern meaning; it denotes a constitution in the sense of a state of being, while the French word *estat* (modern *état*) means estate which corresponds to *ordo* in the Latin.

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<sup>1</sup> Froehlich, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Hausherr, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

While we moderns, in speaking of the tasks of the state, think of its domestic and foreign policies and all they entail, Calvin approaches the state from the viewpoint of the service it can render to the church and to God's kingdom. Hausherr has well said "What he stresses mainly is the service which the power of the State can render to God's rule and to the Church. He has only thought seriously and theoretically about the protection of the two tables of the law."<sup>3</sup> Calvin differs from Luther inasmuch as he holds the view that civil government is responsible not only for enforcing the second table but also the first table of the law.

As we consider Calvin's formulation of his view of the state we discover that, just as in his treatment of the church, it was the concrete situation of his reformatory work which forced him to develop his viewpoint. One may say that Calvin's polemic in defense of the state is directed against three main parties: the Romanists, with their usurpations to both spiritual and temporal authority; the Renaissance political theorists, with their glorification of the state; finally, the Anabaptists, with their anarchistic tendencies with regard to civil government. As we analyze Calvin's various utterances regarding worldly authority, the art of government, the purpose and function of the magistrates, the theocratic motivation of all authority, the relation of subjects to rulers and of rulers to subjects, the right of resistance to secular authority or the problem of order in general, we shall at every turn discover this threefold polemic setting of his own form of thought.

## I. THE THREEFOLD CAUSE OF THE STATE

We may speak of three causes which, according to John Calvin, are responsible for the existence of the state in any ordered society. The first, the fact of sin, the provocative cause; the second, the divine grace and goodness, the efficient cause; the third, the preservation of the human race, the final cause.<sup>4</sup> Since the state represents law and order and since the magistrates, in enforcing such law and order, preserve sinful men from plunging into anarchy and chaos, it follows that Calvin naturally held that the state

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Bohatec, *op. cit.*, p. 171.



might have been unnecessary were it not for the destructive power of sin in human life. Thus he could write:

Had we remained in the state of natural integrity such as God first created, the order of justice would not have been necessary. For each would then have carried the law in his own heart, so that no constraint would have been needed to keep us in check. Each would be his own rule and with one mind we would do what is good and just. Hence, justice is a remedy of this human corruption. And wherever one speaks of human justice let us recognize that in it we have a mirror of our perversity, since it is by force that we are led to follow equity and reason.<sup>5</sup>

## II. CALVIN'S TITLES FOR RULERS

Whether we study Calvin's *Commentaries* or his *Institutes*, particularly the 1559 edition of his master work, the reformer constantly speaks of the princes in the highest terms of respect. Such titles as vicars of God, the officers of God (*les lieutenants de Dieu*), the nursing fathers of the church, the hands of God (*les mains de Dieu*), the souls of the law (*les âmes de la loi*), or even the word "gods," occur in many passages. These titles, most of which Calvin traces to the Scriptures, suggest to him the divine ordering of magisterial and royal authority or, for that matter, of any other authority on earth. For instance, with respect to the title "gods" as applied to rulers Calvin writes,

When those who bear the office of magistrate are called gods, no one suppose that there is little weight in that appellation. It is thereby intimated that they have a commission from God, that they are invested with divine authority, and, in fact, represent the person of God, as whose substitutes (*vacarii*, lieutenants) they in a manner act. This is not a quibble of mine, but is the interpretation of Christ. "If Scripture," says he, "called them gods, to whom the word of God came." <sup>6</sup>

In the same connection Calvin points out that it is not merely due to human perverseness "that supreme power on earth is lodged in kings and other governors, but by Divine Providence, and the holy decree of Him to whom it has seemed good so to

<sup>5</sup> *Opera* XXVII, 409. (*Corpus Reformatum*.)

<sup>6</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 523.

govern the affairs of men, since he is present, and also presides in enacting laws and exercising judicial equity."<sup>7</sup>

A similar idea is advanced in Calvin's commentary on Ezekiel where we read:

While the impious (rulers like King Nebuchadnezzar) take first one course and then another, they are agents of God who governs them by his own secret virtue, and directs them wherever he wishes. As, therefore, men take up all things confusedly, and are, as we see, driven about hither and thither by their lusts, and disturb heaven and earth; yet God moderates their attacks by his secret providence.<sup>8</sup>

Here, as in the whole range of Calvin's thinking, God is conceived as the primary cause of all things in the world which he has made.

### III. THE AUTHORITY OF RULERS

Commenting on Daniel 2: 21, Calvin teaches that "whatever wisdom and power exists in the world, is a testimony to the Almighty's. . . . Experience teaches us these events (i.e., the coming and going of rulers) do not proceed from human skill, or through the equable course of nature, while the loftiest kings are cast down and others elevated to the highest positions of honour."<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is God who ordains, institutes, defends, preserves or, if he deems necessary, overthrows those in power.

Referring to David, the type of all faithful and obedient kings, Calvin writes, on Psalm 2: 1-3:

But, as he had the testimony of an approving conscience, that he had attempted nothing rashly, nor acted as ambition and depraved desire impel many to seek changes in the government of kingdoms; as he was, on the contrary, thoroughly persuaded that he had been made king by divine appointment, when he coveted no such thing, nor even thought of it; he encouraged himself by strong confidence in God against the whole world, or, just as in these words, he nobly pours contempt both on kings and their armies.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> *Commentary on the Prophet Ezekiel*, II, 205.

<sup>9</sup> *Commentary on the Prophet Daniel*, I, 143.

<sup>10</sup> *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, I, 9-10.

Over against the papal claims that princes derive their power through the mediatory office of Christ's vicar on earth, Calvin constantly points to the divine right of kings. This he does, not because he is necessarily the enemy of democracy and the defender of special privilege, but because he seeks to ground all authority, according to his understanding of Holy Writ, in the authority of God.

This divinely given character of the authority of rulers Calvin even asserts for the tyrannical ruler. This he does in his comments on such important passages as 1 Timothy 2: 2 and 1 Peter 2: 13. Calvin argues:

The apostle . . . expressly enjoins Christians to pray for them also. And, indeed, the depravity of men is not a reason why God's ordinance should not be loved. Accordingly, seeing that God appointed magistrates and princes for the preservation of mankind, however much they fall short of the divine appointment, still we must not on that account cease to love what belongs to God, and to desire that it may remain in force. That is the reason why believers, in whatever country they live, must not only obey the laws and government of magistrates, but likewise in their prayers supplicate God for their salvation.<sup>11</sup>

The same sentiment Calvin expresses in his *Commentary on Jeremiah* where he also stresses "that all power comes from God, for God stretches out His hand to whom He will, and according to His pleasure He creates a man king and ruler. All these therefore who have the right of the sword and public power are slaves of God, even if they exercise tyranny and are brigands."<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. OBEDIENCE TO RULERS

In the foregoing discussion of the origin of the state, the titles applied to rulers in Holy Writ, and the direct institution of all secular authority by God himself, it has already become apparent that with Calvin the obedience which men owe their rulers is one that is rendered for God's sake. Thus he writes in his *Commentary on Romans* 13: 1: "The reason why we ought to be sub-

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> *Opera*, XXXVIII, 544. (On Jer. 27: 6.)



ject to magistrates is, because they are constituted by God's ordination. For since it pleases God thus to govern the world, he who attempts to invert the order of God and thus to resist God himself, despises his power; since to despise the providence of him who is the founder of civil power, is to carry on war with him."<sup>13</sup> A wicked prince, as a rule, is the Lord's scourge to punish men's sins. Besides, as Calvin remarks, "there can be no tyranny which does not in some respects assist in consolidating the society of men."<sup>14</sup>

Rulers and magistrates in themselves are nothing. Calvin could speak with withering sarcasm of ambitious rulers in his day who attributed their high position to their prowess or the goddess *Fortuna*. Nor would he allow them to boast in hereditary titles to their dominion. They were what they were because of God. In themselves most of them tended to be corrupted by the honor which they held. He wrote in answer to some Anabaptists who argued that, in view of the equality of all believers, civil government was not for the disciples of Christ, "As we contemplate what the princes are it is but a smoke; they are poor earthen vessels. Yet it is true that they are honorable because God has put his stamp on them, but in themselves they are nothing."<sup>15</sup>

It is, therefore, the *office* and the *function* which rulers occupy and exercise which makes them significant. This office and function is of God's ordering. Hence, obedience to rulers is obedience rendered to God himself. By the same token, disobedience towards divinely instituted rulers is disobedience towards God, the author of government. In his interpretation of Numbers 16, which treats of the rebellion of Korah against Moses and Aaron, Calvin says:

We must observe the expression which he (Moses) uses, that they are in "arms against God"; for, although they might have never confessed to themselves that they had to do with Him, but only that they were contending for the pre-eminence with men; still, because it was their aim to overthrow the order established by God, Moses casts aside all

<sup>13</sup> Calvin's *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans*, (Rev. John Owen trans.), p. 478f.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 480.

<sup>15</sup> *Opera XXVII-LXXVIII* 27-78. (Quoted by Chenevière, *La Pensée Politique de Calvin*, p. 153.)

false pretenses, and sets before them the simple fact that they are waging war with God, when they are fighting with His servants. If, therefore, we are afraid of contending with Him, let us learn to remain in our right place.<sup>16</sup>

## V. HOW RULERS GOT THEIR POWER

It has been observed that in his commentary on Seneca Calvin, just like Aristotle, distinguished between the way a tyrant acquired his power and how a legitimate ruler came to the place of authority. The former, coming to power against the will of his subjects, usurps such power, while the latter derives his power in accordance with law and order. However, in his later writings Calvin excludes this motivation of rightful rule in terms of positive law. In fact, Calvin calls the desire of men who inquire "by what right they who rule have obtained their authority" a "frivolous curiosity."<sup>17</sup> It ought to be enough for us that princes do rule, since they have not achieved their high position by their own power "but have been placed there by the Lord's hand."<sup>18</sup> Well has Murray said:

In nothing is the absence of the historical sense more apparent than in Calvin's refusal "to inquire too curiously by what right each Prince rules." The providence of God bestows kingdoms, and Divine sovereignty estops all questioning. The authority of the Prince is essentially *de facto*: the *de jure* sovereign is no concern of his. The authority of the Prince is the authority of fact.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, it goes without saying that Calvin would at any time prefer the legitimate ruler, governing with discretion and in accordance with established laws and the advice of his counsellors, to the tyrant who ignores all these. Nevertheless, even tyrants bear the mark of divine approval, not as to their persons but as to their office. Thus Calvin, in discussing King Nebuchadnezzar, can speak of him as a servant of God, since he, too, was instituted by God, wielding the sword by virtue of the divine will.

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<sup>16</sup> Calvin's *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, IV, 104.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin's *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 478.

<sup>18</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> R. H. Murray, *The Political Consequences of the Reformation*, p. 99.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin teaches in the same vein. The reformer considers the natural antipathy of the human mind against bad and tyrannous rulers. How can those who love God and esteem justice honor as the ministers of God those who are utterly "careless about their duties," "venally prostitute all rights, privileges, judgments, and enactments," "pillage poor people of their money, and afterwards squander it in insane largesses," or again, why obey those who act "as mere robbers, pillaging houses, violating matrons, and slaying the innocent?" Yet Calvin cannot escape the indubitable teaching of Holy Writ that even such rulers are ordained of God. He writes:

But if we have respect to the Word of God, it will lead us farther, and make us subject not only to the authority of those princes who honestly and faithfully perform their duty toward us, but all princes, by whatever means they have so become, although there is nothing they less perform than the duty of princes. For though the Lord declares that a ruler to maintain our safety is the highest gift of his beneficence, and prescribes to rulers themselves their proper sphere, he at the same time declares, that of whatever description they may be, they derive their power from none but him. Those indeed, who rule for the public good, are true examples and specimens of his beneficence, while those who domineer unjustly and tyrannically are raised up by him to punish the people for their iniquity. Still all alike possess that sacred majesty with which he has invested lawful power.<sup>20</sup>

To prove his contentions, Calvin then proceeds to quote various scriptural passages such as Job 34: 30; Hosea 13: 11; Isaiah 3: 4; 10: 5; Deuteronomy 28: 29; Daniel 2: 21, 37; 4: 17, 25; 5: 18, 19, and 1 Samuel 8: 11-17. After speaking *in extenso* of Jeremiah 27: 5-8, referring to Nebuchadnezzar as "an active invader and devastator of other countries,"<sup>21</sup> Calvin concludes thus:

This feeling of reverence, and even of piety, we owe to the utmost to all our rulers, be their character what they may. This I repeat the oftener, that we may learn not to consider the individuals themselves, but hold it to be enough that by the will of the Lord they sustain a character on which he has impressed and engraven inviolable majesty. But rulers, you will say, owe mutual duties to those under them. This

<sup>20</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 546.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 547.



I have already confessed. But if from this you conclude that obedience is to be returned to none but just governors, you reason absurdly. Husbands are bound by mutual duties to their wives, and parents to their children. Should husbands and parents neglect their duty; should the latter be harsh and severe to the children whom they are enjoined not to provoke to anger, and by their severity harass them beyond measure; should the former treat with the greatest contumely the wives whom they are enjoined to love and to spare as the weaker vessels; would children be less bound in duty to their parents, and wives to their husbands? They are made subject to the froward and undutiful. Nay, since the duty of all is not to look behind them, that is, not to inquire into the duties of one another, but to submit each to his own duty, this ought especially to be exemplified in the case of those who are placed under the power of others. Wherefore, if we are cruelly tormented by a savage, if we are rapaciously pillaged by an avaricious or luxurious, if we are neglected by a sluggish, if, in short, we are persecuted for righteousness' sake by an impious and sacrilegious prince, let us first call up the remembrance of our faults, which doubtless the Lord is chastising by such scourges. In this way humility will curb our impatience. And let us reflect that it belongs not to us to cure these evils, that all that remains for us is to implore the help of the Lord, in whose hands are the hearts of kings, and inclinations of kingdoms.<sup>22</sup>

This is strange doctrine indeed. It is a rugged and stern doctrine. Karl Holl, referring to Calvin's advice to his suffering French co-religionists to endure the cross to the bitter end, rightly says:

Frictions between State and Church are the order of the day in Calvinistic countries. But at home as also abroad Calvin was painfully concerned that the authority of the State and the respect for law and order suffer no harm even in times of conflict. In the end it is almost cruel when Calvin unceasingly writes the French Protestants to keep their souls in patience and to wait until in an orderly fashion a change for the better takes place. Confession and, if need be, martyrdom, but no deeds of violence!<sup>23</sup>

However, Calvin is not a fatalist because of his advocacy of obedience to rulers, whether good or bad. He knows of God's judgment which shall surely overtake the bad or tyrannous ruler, either in this life or in the next. For God does raise up "manifest

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 550-551.

<sup>23</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, III, p. 278.

avengers from among his own servants, and gives them his command to punish accursed tyranny, and deliver his people from calamity when they are unjustly oppressed."<sup>24</sup> But if not in time, then in God's eternal judgment will all wickedness and tyranny of rulers be avenged. In the light of an eternal perspective Calvin cannot grow as easily impatient as we moderns who have lost that perspective to a large extent. Commenting on 1 Timothy 6: 15-16 Calvin can say, with calm assurance of faith, "The sum of it is, that all the governments of the world are subject to his dominion; depend upon him, and stand or fall at his bidding; but that the authority of the Lord is beyond all comparison, because all the rest are nothing as compared with his glory, and while they fade and quickly perish, his authority will endure for ever."<sup>25</sup>

In view of what we have said concerning Calvin's refusal to pry into the *de jure* claims of any given prince and his insistence upon the *believer's* acceptance of God's ordering of all authority, the young Swiss jurist Chenevière may well be referred to here. He says, "Thus, for Calvin the exact knowledge of the nature of the State is a part of faith. The State is not the object of natural, but of revealed knowledge. It is no doubt for this reason that all the Catechisms and Confessions of faith edited by Calvin or inspired by him, contain one or several paragraphs that are devoted to the State."<sup>26</sup>

This leads us to the last consideration of this section, namely:

## VI. CALVIN'S POSITION REVEALED IN CATECHISMS AND CONFESSIONS

In the Genevan Confession of 1536 the magistracy is discussed under Article 21. The opening statement of this article declares: "We consider the eminence and rule, both of kings and princes, as of other magistrates and superiors, to be a holy matter and good ordinance of God."<sup>27</sup>

The sacredness of the office of magistrate Calvin, in this Con-

<sup>24</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 551.

<sup>25</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 167.

<sup>26</sup> *La Pensée Politique de Calvin*, p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

fession, attests by insisting that "we must honor them as vicars and lieutenants of God, whom no one may resist, lest we be resisting God Himself and their office which is a holy commission from God, and which He has given them in order to govern and rule over us."<sup>28</sup>

The Genevan Catechism of 1537 affirms that "the Lord has not only testified that the office of the magistrates is approved of Him and pleasing to Him, but he has also greatly commended it to us . . . Their command is the command of God."<sup>29</sup> The Articles of Lausanne of 1536 very precisely declare what the church conceives worldly authority to be; namely "the Church acknowledges the magistrate as ordained of God only."<sup>30</sup> Here, as Chenevière rightly suggests, the medieval theory is rejected according to which a ruler holds his power indirectly from God and directly from the Roman pontiff or the church.<sup>31</sup>

The same emphasis upon the divine institution of government is found, basically, in the Catechism of 1545, the Confession of La Rochelle, and that of the Netherlands.<sup>32</sup> The Gallican Confession of 1559 is likewise very explicit with respect to this matter. We read:

We believe that God wishes to have the world governed by laws and magistrates, so that some restraint may be put upon its disordered appetites. And as He has established kingdoms, republics, and all sorts of principalities, either hereditary or otherwise, and all that belongs to a just government, and wishes to be considered as their Author, so He has put the sword into the hands of magistrates to suppress crimes against the first as well as the second table of the Commandments of God.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Opera* 22-73.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-702.

<sup>31</sup> Chenevière, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>32</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Schaff, Article XXXIX, *Creeds of Christendom*, III, 381-382.



## *The Duties of Magistrates and Rulers*

### I. TO MAINTAIN THE HONOR OF GOD AND PRESERVE PUBLIC WORSHIP

In the *Institutes* Calvin teaches with unmistakable clarity the distinction as well as the relatedness of church and state, or as he puts it, of the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government. These two spheres are "widely separated," yet, because they have their origin in God and both must serve the purpose of God, they ought to be related to one another through the service which they mutually render each other. The purpose of these two spheres of God's dominion is brought out very distinctly in these words:

But as we lately taught that kind of government is distinct from the spiritual and internal kingdom of Christ, so we ought to know that they are not adverse to each other. The former, in some measure, begins the heavenly kingdom in us, even now upon earth, and in this mortal and evanescent life commences immortal and incorruptible blessedness, while to the latter is assigned, so long as we live among men, to foster and maintain the external worship of God, to defend sound doctrine and the condition of the Church, to adapt our conduct to human society, to form our manners to civil justice, to conciliate us to each other, to cherish common peace and tranquility.<sup>1</sup>

This statement sums up in one comprehensive sweep Calvin's idea regarding the duty of magistrates and civil rulers. They have duties, clear and precise, both toward God and man. But regard of God's laws is primary in the obedience of a just ruler.

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<sup>1</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 521. Also: *Corpus Reformatum*, XXXIX 363 (Volui enim sicut aequum est spiritualement potestatem a civili iudicio distingui).

Calvin, who knew both the church fathers and classical literature well, finds that even "profane writers . . . and philosophers" of ancient, pagan peoples did not discourse on the duty of magistrates, the enacting of laws, and the common weal without giving primary consideration to religion and divine worship. In fact, "those laws are absurd which disregard the rights of God, and consult only for men."<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, the sacred duty of rulers everywhere "to exert themselves in asserting and defending the honour of Him whose vicegerents they are, and by whose favour they rule."<sup>3</sup>

When Calvin speaks of the "external worship of God" he is mainly concerned about the suppression of idolatry in a Christian commonwealth. Thus he teaches in the *Institutes* and also in his commentaries. In the former, he makes clear that bodily welfare, however necessary, "is not its only object, but it is that no idolatry, no blasphemy against the name of God, no calumnies against his truth, nor other offences to religion, break out and be disseminated among the people."<sup>4</sup> Or as the Gallican Confession of 1559 motivates the reason for the state's authority in this regard: "And thus God has established the kingdoms (of earth) and has put the sword into the hands of magistrates in order to suppress sins committed not only against the second table of the commandments of God, but also against those of the first table."<sup>5</sup>

The Belgic Confession, though not composed by Calvin himself, yet breathes his spirit, since its author, the later martyred Guido de Bres, had the assistance of men like Francis Junius de Bourges who, in his student days, had sat at the feet of Calvin in Geneva. Article XXVI is typically Calvinist when, among other things, it declares:

For this purpose he hath invested the magistracy with the sword, for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well. And their office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 529.

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 522.

<sup>5</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed, and the kingdom of Christ promoted.<sup>6</sup>

## II. TO PROTECT THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

This duty of Christian princes Calvin enjoined upon many of the Christian rulers of his day who had either directly espoused the cause of the evangelicals or were at least interested in it. Even Charles V, the Catholic emperor, is earnestly admonished to take proper and speedy measures to effect the reform of the Church. More important, however necessary, than the preparations of war against the Turks, Calvin argues, is "the consultation which ought to be first, the consultation how to restore the Church to its proper state."<sup>7</sup>

In the same vein, Calvin wrote to the Queen of Navarre, King Edward VI of England, Somerset, Lord Protector of England, the city fathers of his own Geneva or those of near-by Bern. An example of such admonitions is: "Wherefore we hope that as faithful Christian princes you will aid us in this cause and will not allow the Church of God to be dissipated under your protection or that the Gospel be maligned, for we abstain from making trouble and hence have peaceable recourse to you, rendering service to his glory by honoring the authority which he has given you."<sup>8</sup>

Or again, in the same ardor, for the welfare of God's people: "Not only are the magistrates admonished to submit themselves to the domination and obedience of God, but also to use all their power in order to maintain the Church and to defend the true religion."<sup>9</sup>

Christian princes are even duty-bound to bring the church into being where it does not as yet exist. Thus Calvin congratulates Prince Nicolas Radziwill of Poland for having done all in his power to maintain, advance and promote the church in his domain. To this prince, Calvin, in his dedicatory preface to his *Commentary on Acts*, declares that Christian rulers hold *le glaive*

<sup>6</sup> Schaff, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

<sup>7</sup> *Calvin's Tracts*, I, 232-233.

<sup>8</sup> *Opera* 15, 252; cf. 11-459; 13, 670. Cf. Chenevière, *op. cit.*, p. 238 f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, 404.



*en la main pour maintenir et défendre le règne de son Fils.*<sup>10</sup> This dedication is dated August, 1560. Three years later, when writing to the Queen of Navarre who had succeeded her husband to the throne, Calvin admonishes her to have regard to God's honor and to the welfare of the church in her domain. He reminds the queen of why Paul enjoined believers to pray for kings and all those in authority, namely in order that "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." The apostle places the fear of God before the civil virtues. In one of his letters Calvin expressed it thus:

Before speaking of civil virtues, he exalts the fear of God, wherein he signifies that the office of princes is to ensure that God be purely adored. I take account of the difficulties that may keep you back, the fears and doubts which may rob you of courage, but do not doubt, my lady, that however many counsellors may be around you, they will, if they have regard to this world, try to hinder you. But it is certain that all fear of men which keeps us from duly honoring God and leads us to rob him of his riches, merely testifies that we do not truly fear him and hardly value his invincible virtue which he has promised to us.<sup>11</sup>

It is, Calvin asserts in the same letter, the duty of all Christian princes to purge their lands of all idolatrous practices by which the purity of true religion is being corrupted. Those who cowardly suggest that princes may not coerce their subjects to live decent Christian lives are profane babblers. For it is clearly part of God's commandment, and great peril will engulf every kingdom which will not minister to the kingdom of Jesus Christ; in fact, such rebellious earthly kingdoms are doomed to ruin.<sup>12</sup>

The passages which Calvin adduces in the above mentioned letter to the Queen of Navarre are to be found in 1 Timothy 2: 2, 1 John 5: 4, Isaiah 5: 18-19, and 2 Peter 3: 3-4. The first passage from Paul's letter to Timothy is cited twice in Calvin's *Institutes*, dealing with civil government.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Réprimé dans Calvin, homme d'Eglise*, (1936) p. 305. Quoted by Chenevière, *op. cit.*, p. 240. ("The sword in their hands in order to maintain and defend the reign of his Son.")

<sup>11</sup> Bonnet, *Lettres Francaises de Jean Calvin*, II, 490 f.

<sup>12</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 525, 545.

### III. TO PRESERVE PUBLIC LAW AND ORDER

Having treated of the magistrate's duty to enforce the first table of the Decalogue, that is, the proper relation of man towards God, it remains to deal with the magistrate's duty to enforce the second table of the Law, that is, the proper relation of man towards his neighbor.

Positively speaking, magistrates and princes, as vicars of God on earth, are the God "ordained guardians and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, honour, and tranquility, so that it should be their only study to provide for the common peace and safety."<sup>14</sup> Negatively speaking, this exercise of the magisterial office implies that, in the interest of justice and equity, manifest evildoers and offenders against the common weal be strictly and justly apprehended and punished.

"If they [magistrates] did not restrain the hardihood of the wicked men," argues Calvin in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2: 2, "every place would be full of robberies and murders."<sup>15</sup> Man, unless restrained by force and the fear of punishment, easily surpasses even wild beasts in his self-will and the ferocity of outbreaking evil. The fall having corrupted all of mankind, men are in dire need of the restraint of civil government, of law and order. The justice of duly constituted civil authority, though it restrains our freedom and curbs our passions, is really a mirror of our perversity, but at the same time a token of divine grace, since God ordains rightful rule lest we be plunged into anarchy and chaos.

In other words, besides the ultimate purpose of all civil authority to serve the interests of God's kingdom, it serves the very practical purpose of the preservation of the human race and the making possible of an ordered social life. While Martin Luther emphasized more the negative role of the state as a curb on evil and its care for the bodily welfare of its subjects, Calvin, on the contrary, considers the state in terms of a *Kulturstaat*, that is, a civilizing agency, whose duty it is, under God, to assure the harmonious life of individuals and society.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 530.

<sup>15</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> See: Hausherr, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-17; Also Chenevière, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

## IV. TO REMEMBER THEIR ACCOUNTABILITY TO GOD

It may easily be argued that Calvin's uncompromising assertion of the divine ordering of all civil authority might have encouraged absolutism in government. But that would be a misinterpretation of Calvin's deepest intentions and an uncalled-for misapprehension. The history of Calvinism, moreover, definitely disproves any charge that might be made against Calvin and his system of politics in this regard.

While Calvin enjoins obedience to both good and evil rulers, to both legitimate and illegitimate—that is, tyrannical rulers—he does not on that account encourage absolutism of those in power or craven servility of those whom princes or magistrates govern. Calvin's basic principle of the sovereignty of God, involving as it does, as A. Lecerf has aptly put it, "the biblical view concerning the ontological rule of God over the creatures of the Kingdom of God in its ethical and spiritual reality and concerning the Kingdom of Christ in view of its dynamic-progressive coming as also with a view of its eschatological ultimate coming,"<sup>17</sup> precludes all self-sufficient absolutisms of rulers. As Murray has said: "The Frenchman believes in sovereigns because he believes in God, but there is little of the halo of Divine right around them."<sup>18</sup>

Murray's remark must not be interpreted as suggesting that Calvin denied for a moment the "divine right of kings" if rightly understood. It is, moreover, as Bohatec has indicated, eminently true that Calvin describes the relation of God to worldly authority in analogy with the principles of the absolute state, particularly that of the French state of his era. The judges and other magistrates of the French kingdom, according to its own intrinsic law, were not feudal powers who had received their office as a fief. These French *magistrats inférieurs* were, strictly speaking, officials of the king. They occupied a simple office, given to them by the king, who, in turn, could withdraw it at his own good pleasure. Likewise, God, who ordains magistrates, kings, princes, and the like, to govern, considers them his officers who hold this public

<sup>17</sup> "Thesen zum christlichen Staatsverstaendnis des Calvinismus," *Die Kirche und das Staatsproblem in der Gegenwart*, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 99.



office by virtue of his sovereign will. Hence, princes and rulers are subject to God, and it is God who makes kings to rise and fall. They cannot do as they please if they would be true representatives of God's power and glory on earth.

Calvin was fully aware of the dangerous currents and ideas which the French-Italian Renaissance had released in his day. The glorification of the self-sufficient ruler, the apotheosis of the man of arbitrary power, the usurpations of human absolutisms as found in Machiavelli or the papacy, these, as Bohatec succinctly says, *musste dem fuer die Autoritaet Gottes kaempfenden Reformator als Beleidigung der goettlichen Majestaet erscheinen*.<sup>19</sup> In fact, as the same author points out, Calvin really transferred, with deliberate intention, all the juridical-political concepts that motivate earthly absolutism to the relation of God and the authorities that issue from the Creator. Thus, Bohatec can say: "God having all the predicates of an absolute ruler appears therefore as the only true monarch, but from whose character all tyrannical features must be carefully deleted, under whose sceptre a limited freedom is not only permitted, but demanded and is demanded."<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the king's authority is only derivative, hence relative, conditioned, and limited by God to whom all princes are ultimately accountable. In his commentary on Ezekiel Calvin clearly says:

Meanwhile, we must notice the Prophet's freedom, because he here fearlessly attacks the most noble princes . . . He shows, therefore, his strength of mind, since he does not spare the nobles. Hence this useful doctrine is collected, that those who excel in reputation and rank are not free from blame if they conduct themselves wickedly, as we see happens in the Papacy. For, as to the Pope himself, it is in his power to condemn the whole world, while he exempts himself from all blame. But here the Prophet shows that however eminent are those who are endued with power over the people, yet they are not sacred or absolved from all law by any peculiar privilege, since God freely judges them by his Spirit and reproves them by his Prophets.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Bohatec, *op. cit.*, p. 188. ("Had to appear to the Reformer fighting for God's authority as an offense of the divine majesty.")

<sup>20</sup> Bohatec, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>21</sup> *Commentaries on the Prophet Ezekiel*, I, 348.

To the king of France Calvin had said in the preface of his *Institutio christianae religionis* that he was not a king but a robber, who does not rule for the purpose of ministering to God's honor. And while the evangelical cause may seem contemptible to his august majesty, Calvin calmly reminds his sovereign that the doctrine of Christ is far above all the glory of this world. The Lord of the church is destined to rule from sea to sea. With his power he fills the whole earth which, despite all its resources in iron, gold and silver, is nothing in comparison with his might, for he can break the glory of the earth to pieces like earthen vessels with the staff of his mouth.

In Calvin's commentary on Ezekiel the reader is assured that "whatever happens, God has so established the Kingdom of Christ, that it shall last as long as the sun and the moon, but the other empires of the world shall vanish away with their own splendour and their loftiness shall fall although at present they overtop the clouds."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, like Luther, Calvin also has his *Fuerstenspiegel*.<sup>23</sup> In his comment on Psalm 72, Calvin writes:

It is therefore requisite for a king to be a man of wisdom, and resolutely prepared effectually to restrain the violent and injurious, that the rights of the meek and orderly may be preserved unimpaired. Thus none will be fit for governing a people but he who has learned to be rigorous when the case requires. Licentiousness must necessarily prevail under an effeminate and inactive sovereign, or even under one who is of a disposition too gentle and forbearing. There is much truth in the old saying that it is worse to live under a prince through whose lenity everything is lawful, than under a tyrant where there is no liberty at all.<sup>24</sup>

While traveling on the European continent in the summer of 1938, I found myself in the same compartment with a Polish merchant who had just visited Paris. He alluded to the gaiety of the French capital and mentioned that every moral degradation was on display. With considerable satisfaction this young man approved of what he called the "perfect freedom" of beautiful

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 213.

<sup>23</sup> Mirror for princes.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.* *Psalms*, III, 105-106

Paris. I wonder what Calvin would think of a liberty that has become license?

A ruler, as the *Institutes* teach, must have a "zeal for integrity, prudence, meekness, continence, and innocence."<sup>25</sup> The just princes dare not "admit iniquity to their tribunal, when they are told that it is the throne of the living God."<sup>26</sup> They ought to feel greatly "animated to duty when they hear that they are the ambassadors of God, to whom they must one day render an account of the province committed to them."<sup>27</sup> Nor let them ever forget that "if they sin in any respect, not only is injury done to the men whom they wickedly torment, but they also insult God himself, whose sacred tribunals they pollute."<sup>28</sup>

Even the Catholic historian, Kampschulte, had to admit:

Calvin does not only strengthen the conscience of worldly authority, as the German Reformer boasted to have done, he at the same time sharpens it. The bearers of the power of state are to him the God appointed disciplinarians of men and they are personally responsible for the sins which they allow to go unpunished. Only through severe, unbiased, energetic action will they be able to fulfill their difficult task, for man by nature inclines to evil and rebellion.<sup>29</sup>

A good, responsible prince, Calvin suggests, surrounds himself with wise counsellors. He sees the basic difference between a legitimate ruler and a tyrant in this: while the latter rules solely according to his own whim and will, the former shows his moderation by heeding the advice of sound counsellors. That is why Calvin favored a government where councils and rulers worked harmoniously together, each checking and restraining as well as aiding the other, for the common good of all.

Vigorously, Calvin inweighs against courtiers and flatterers who insinuate to their rulers that they are above the law. Such men really oppose God's government. "We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him, let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be

<sup>25</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 525.

<sup>26</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 526.

<sup>28</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Kampschulte, *op. cit.*, p. 422.



moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates—a dignity to which no injury is done when it is subordinated to the special and truly supreme power of God.”<sup>30</sup> Fundamental to Calvin is the truth that the Lord is King of kings. “When he opens his sacred mouth, he alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all.”<sup>31</sup> Again, Calvin’s doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God, his faith in the supreme governor of the universe, saves him from craven fear of those in power and makes him a stern prophet of judgment against all who in any way transcend their creaturely limitations or usurp to themselves the prerogatives of God.

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<sup>30</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 553.

<sup>31</sup> *Loc. cit.*

## *The State and the Citizen*

### I. THE STATE'S AUTHORITY OVER THE CITIZEN

#### 1. The Right of Capital Punishment

Moderns have often judged that Calvin was heartless and cruel in his dealing with sin and crime. Calvin, in turn, might well accuse much of modern judicial procedure "the most cruel inhumanity," since it often tends to give "way to soft and dissolute indulgence to the destruction of many." A true prince or judge should seek to guard against the two extremes of executing justice: "excessive severity and a superstitious affectation of clemency."<sup>1</sup>

Those who like some of the *Schwaezmer* tried to discredit the power of the magistrates' sword against evildoers by pointing to the divine law that forbids men to kill or by adducing Christ's law of non-resistance to evil, Calvin reminded of the *public character* of magistrates and judges. He reasoned:

But if we understand that the magistrate, in inflicting punishment, acts not of himself, but executes the very judgments of God, we shall be disencumbered of every doubt. The law of the Lord forbids to kill; but, that murder may not go unpunished, the Lawgiver himself puts the sword into the hands of his ministers, that they may employ it against all murders. It belongs not to the pious to afflict and hurt, but to avenge the afflictions of the pious, at the command of God, is neither to afflict nor hurt.<sup>2</sup>

In the French text of the *Institutes* these words are added:

However it is easy to conclude that in this regard they are not subject to the common law by which the Lord otherwise binds the hands of all men, yet he does not bind his justice which he exercises through the

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<sup>1</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 533.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 531.

hands of magistrates. Therefore when a prince forbids his subjects to carry the sword or to wound anybody, he does not on that account hinder his officers to execute the justice which he has especially committed to them.<sup>3</sup>

That Calvin was not unconcerned about the problem of love and justice is shown in the analysis of it in some of his sermons. Chenevière has pointed our attention to one of them in which the reformer reflects that to shed human blood is a terrible thing, since man is made in the image of God. But he at once recalls the depravity of man which, if allowed unchecked, would engulf the world in a sea of violence and bloodshed.<sup>4</sup> In another sermon Calvin rather impatiently asks the question: "I ask you, what mercy would it be to spare a single person while a thousand other poor souls go to perdition because they are not admonished. Must one in that case be moved with pity towards a wolf while meanwhile one allows to perish the poor sheep and lambs which the Lord has special regard for?"<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Right of War in Defense of Land and People.

The right of a state to go to war, Calvin like Luther, conceives, as a continuation of the administration of justice, only with different means.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, he faces the problem as to what constitutes a just or lawful war. The latter is only then justified when carried on in defense of one's own country. Just as magistrates carry the sword against robbers and murderers, so they likewise wield power in order to oppose willful aggressors against their country's tranquillity and safety. Hence, "natural equity and duty, therefore, demand that princes be armed not only to repress private crimes by judicial inflictions, but to defend the subjects committed to their guardianship whenever they are hostilely assailed. Such even the Holy Spirit, in many passages of Scripture, declares to be lawful."<sup>7</sup> However, Calvin warns against undue haste in mak-

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*, Footnote by translator.

<sup>4</sup> Chenevière, *op. cit.*, p. 279. (From unpublished sermon in the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Genève; folio 22, verso, ligne 12 et suiv. Sermon sur Samuel II.)

<sup>5</sup> *Opera* 54, 158.

<sup>6</sup> Hausherr, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Institutes*, II iv, 534.



ing war. A ruler is to beware of allowing mere private feeling to carry him into warlike adventures. His sole regard must be for the public good.

### 3. The Right to Levy Taxes for the Support of the Commonwealth.

Taxes, Calvin reasons, are legitimate for rulers to levy, provided they use discretion and use the taxes both for the maintenance of their own private and the people's public needs. However, "princes . . . must remember . . . that their revenues are not so much private chests as treasuries of the whole people, which they cannot, without manifest injustice, squander or dilapidate."<sup>8</sup>

That Calvin took seriously his own description of taxes as being "almost the blood of the people, which it were the harshest inhumanity not to spare,"<sup>9</sup> is proved by his frequent complaints about the irregularities and oppressive tax policies of the French army leaders. He bitterly assailed the avarice of the Guise party, charging them with abusing the name of the king in order to amass troops and funds under the pretense of protecting religion.<sup>10</sup> Calvin's co-religionists in France were especially heavily taxed, being accused of causing confusions and revolts. Calvinists were denied admission to the royal army, while the Guise people continued to enrich themselves.

Calvin accused both the higher and lower officials of the French army of carrying on this campaign of pillage of the public by means of tax levies. The lower tax collectors literally robbed the poor. These conditions were accentuated by the fact that the king sold these jobs to the highest bidder. Calvin joined the *Estates* in their indictment of this evil system, demanding its abolition, since it was unworthy of a free people to barter away public offices.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 536.

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> *Opera* 18, 218.

<sup>11</sup> *Opera* 27, 410. "Qu'un courtisan qui aura crédit, non seulement obtiendra les offices, mais il les fera distribuer à sa poste. La corruption est encore plus grande et plus villaine: car les officiers s'exposent aujourd'huy en vente toute ainsi qu'une marchandise" ("That a courtier, well positioned, not only could secure offices, but he will also cause them to be distributed on his own terms. In fact, the corruption is even greater and more villainous, for the officers expose themselves to-day for sale as though they were a piece of merchandise.")

Bohatec has the highest praise for Calvin's knowledge of existing conditions under the reign of Henry II, since he reveals a most intimate acquaintance with the politico-juridical, socio-political, and socio-economic circumstances and interests of the French nation. Hence, Calvin's homily on Samuel, just like his controversial tracts against the Guise party of 1560, have a strong *publizistischen Charakter*.<sup>12</sup>

That Calvin paid particular attention to the tithes as a source of public revenue need not cause surprise. According to Catholic Canon law the tithes (*decimae*, dimes) was sanctioned both in divine and human law.<sup>13</sup> Calvin, however, denied the right of the Catholic Church to levy the tithes, since their priests were not to be regarded as continuing the office of the Old Testament Levites. Moreover, in the era of the Fathers, Calvin avers, neither priests nor the spiritual leaders of the Church as a whole, but rather secular authorities, levied the tithes. Pious Christian emperors, moved by considerations of equity or in answer to their Christian duty, levied the tithes for the maintenance of the Church. Hence, Calvin concluded, the papacy assumes this right to levy the tithes without a foundation in either law or history. This right belongs to the secular authorities. However, Calvin did not think as Luther did that the Jewish tithes were necessarily applicable to modern conditions. The tithes based on the *lex naturae* Calvin approved.

We see, then, that here as in all political matters Calvin strove earnestly for integrity and order in the administration of public levies, lest the people, particularly the common folk, be unduly pressed down with unbearable burdens and lest God's judgments strike a nation because of the unfaithfulness of its appointed guardians of justice.

## II. RELATION OF CITIZENS TO THE STATE

### 1. Citizens Ought to Honor All in Authority.

It would appear from the foregoing that all that Calvin demanded of believers would be a stern, cold obedience to the powers

<sup>12</sup> Bohatec, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

that be. But that is not so. He enjoined that "the first duty of subjects towards their rulers, is to entertain the most honourable views of their office, recognizing it as a delegated jurisdiction from God, and on that account receiving and reverencing them as the ministers and ambassadors of God."<sup>14</sup>

Those who merely consider their rulers a necessary evil had better get the divine perspective of the matter. They ought to remember the apostle Peter's admonition which says, "Honour the king," (1 Peter 2: 17). For in holding our rulers in highest esteem we are honoring God, the author of all authority.

## 2. Citizens Owe Obedience to All in Authority.

We have already touched on this point in several parts of this essay. Suffice it to point out that Calvin again and again stresses the fact that our obedience to rulers is willed of God, not for their own sakes, as persons and individuals, but for the sake of the office which God has instituted. In the Catechism of 1537 we read that it is the duty of subjects, "voluntarily to submit themselves to their dominion, to obey their edicts and constitutions and not to refuse the charges which are imposed upon them by the authorities, that is, taxes, bridge tolls, tributes and other rents or offices, civil commission fees and whatever belongs to that category."<sup>15</sup> This passage, as Chenevière has called it, is a 'practical paraphrase' of the relevant passage in the *Institutes*.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, Calvin insisted, our obedience must be gladly and willingly rendered, since it is pleasing to God that we thus obey the magistrates. By rendering this obedience we make possible the tranquillity and peace which God would that princes maintain or secure. Again, we promote godliness as we obey with a glad heart and allow rulers to create the very conditions which are necessary for the progress of God's kingdom.

The necessity of this obedience Calvin impresses upon his readers and hearers by appealing first of all to Holy Writ, secondly to sound reasoning. But, as we had occasion to point out previously, the decisive reason for our obedience to earthly rulers is the will

<sup>14</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 554.

<sup>15</sup> *Opera* 22, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Chenevière, *op. cit.*, p. 299.



of God. Calvin wrote in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:2: "After having taught what he enjoined is useful, he now brings forward a stronger argument—that it pleases God; for when we know what is his will, this ought to have the force of all possible reasons."<sup>17</sup>

### 3. The *Mutua Obligatio* Between Rulers and Citizens

The meaning of the principle of a "mutual obligation" for the nature and structure of Calvin's idea of the state must have been noted in the varied implications of what we have already dealt with under previous headings. The mutual obligation of both partners of a given commonwealth, an obligation which is grounded in the established law of the land, make of such commonwealth a constitutional state.

It is well known that in the Middle Ages this *mutua obligatio* was conceived in terms of a contractual relation between king and subject. According to Manegold von Lauterbach the two partners swore fealty to one another and hence were mutually bound to each other. Some medieval theorists also motivated this contract by asserting that the emperor, as the successor of the Roman Caesars, derived his *lex regia* ultimately from the people. Subsequently, the representatives of natural law taught that the juridical ground of all rule lay in a voluntary and contractual subjection of all the members of a realm. Since the eleventh century these political theorists and later the *Monarchomachi*<sup>18</sup> also taught that the one party of the contract was obligated to the other only to the extent that the other performed its duty. Here Calvin breaks with the tradition which would allow a reservation in case of the default of a ruler. For we have seen that even bad rulers are to be obeyed, provided they do not coerce us to do things that are clearly contrary to God's will.

Calvin strongly emphasizes that all those who enter into contractual relations with one another ought to make these contracts in the presence of the living God. Legislators, eager to make new laws, ought to call upon God as witness to their intentions and

<sup>17</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, op. cit.*,

p. 53-54.

<sup>18</sup> Opponents of monarchy such as Hotman, Beza, Estienne, and others.

transactions. Only thus do contracts receive true sanction; only thus is justice safe and equity in the relation between rulers and subjects guaranteed. But what if one partner of a contract breaks the contract? What if the ruler becomes faithless in the fulfilment of his part of the *mutua obligatio*? This leads us to our next consideration.

#### 4. The Possibility of Resistance to the Higher Powers.

Calvin holds that all contracts which have been made before God preclude the right to revolution on the part of individual subjects. Calvin, then, is a strict legitimist when it comes to doing away with a ruler or government that is patently in default.

Christian believers obey both good and bad rulers. As individuals they dare not resist, for that would mean resisting God's own majesty. However, if a ruler should utterly despoil all justice, and openly and flagrantly violate God's law which demands that men should obey him supremely, then, as we saw previously, Christians must refuse obedience, remembering that "we must obey God more than men." Rather spit into a ruler's face than obey him if he orders us to rob God of his glory!

However, there is one way in which a bad ruler may be deposed, and that is through the constituted lower magistrates: princes, estates. Thus, for the citizen, as a private individual, Calvin knows only one imperative: Obey those who are set over you! Suffer for Christ's sake if the ruler is neglectful of his duty or even oppressive in his dealing with you! But the *Estates-General*, as representatives of constitutional order, may indeed resist the ruler if resistance is required for the sake of public welfare. As Carlyle has put the matter: "The truth is that Calvin makes a sharp distinction between the position of private persons and that of those who hold a public and constitutional office in the State."<sup>19</sup>

The constant advice of the reformer to be patient in suffering must at times have appeared to his harrassed fellow-religionists, bitterly oppressed by the French crown, as an unparalleled form of cruelty. Yet Calvin himself faces the question whether or not the mutuality of obligation between ruler and his subjects is not made illusory if the former utterly fails to administer his high

<sup>19</sup> Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, p. 265.

office with justice and equity. But having faced the question he beats it down as a silly rationalization. Let the individual subjects simply perform their duty, leaving the rest to God. The Almighty will sooner or later find a way of dealing with evil and obstreperous rulers. Has he not in Israel's history raised up avengers who, at his behest, came to punish wicked rulers and to free the people from oppression and tyranny? But where a nation like France is fortunate enough to have representative *Estates*, who are set to restrain the caprice of the ruler, it is their bounden duty to resist the encroachments of such wicked sovereign.

As far as individual resistance is concerned, Hausherr has excellently articulated the problem when he writes:

The very high ideal which Calvin has of the vocation of secular authority makes his critique of the actual princes so cutting, and this the more so, since he can base his arguments on the opposition to the Old Testament kings as it is expressed in the books of Samuel. But no evil experience can shake him in the conviction that one may never and under no circumstances be disobedient to the *Obrigkeit*. It is a terribly cruel and vicious circle: the princes believe that they can do as they please, since no one resists them and: to resist the *Obrigkeit* means to resist God. The illegitimacy of a regime does not entitle him who has no express call to engender resistance or a change.<sup>20</sup>

Calvin acknowledges, for instance, tyrannicide as something quite reasonable; but when a private person murders a tyrant king, he oversteps the boundary of his calling. Thus, he can say that "there is no more illustrious deed even among philosophers than to free one's own country from tyranny, and yet the private individual who stabs the tyrant is openly condemned by the voice of the heavenly Judge."<sup>21</sup>

Here, as in so many areas of ethical behavior, if not in all, each one must "know that in everything the call of the Lord is the foundation and beginning of right action. He who does not act with reference to it will never, in the discharge of duty, keep the right path."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Hausherr, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> *Institutes*, II, III, 298.

<sup>22</sup> *Loc. cit.*



## Calvin's View of Natural and Positive Law

CALVIN, the jurist and the defender of God's honor, had the highest regard for law and order. Laws are next in importance to the office of magistrate: for laws, "the strongest sinews of government, or, as Cicero calls them after Plato, the soul, without which, the office of the magistrate cannot exist; just as, on the other hand, laws have no vigour without the magistrate."<sup>1</sup> It is because of this high regard for laws as the sinews of government that Calvin is the legitimist which we found him to be.

Over against the absolutistic-monarchistic publicists of his day who tried to interpret the power and authority of a ruler in terms of the Roman adage *princeps legibus solutus*, thus making the king a law in himself, and over against the Anabaptist error of denying the title of a rightful state to any commonwealth which, instead of observing the law of Moses, adhered merely to the common law of nations, Calvin asserted the validity of the positive law as well as the *ius gentium*. He considers those advocating the former error as guilty of pride toward God, the only supreme ruler, while he accused the latter of seditious intents. Not all that Moses decreed is binding for us today. Nor is it right to consider Moses as a mere earthly lawgiver like Lycurgus or Solon.

In the *Lex Mosaica* Calvin distinguishes, following current trends, three aspects: the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial law. The ceremonial and judicial law, since they are subject to change and abrogation due to time and circumstances, are not valid for us today. For, argues Calvin, "each nation has been left

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<sup>1</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 536.

at liberty to enact laws which it judges to be beneficial.”<sup>2</sup> The moral law, however, enjoining as it does “to worship God with pure faith and piety . . . and to embrace men with sincere affection, is the true and eternal rule of righteousness prescribed to the men of all nations and of all times, who would frame their life agreeable to the will of God.”<sup>3</sup> This leads us to our next point, the relation between the natural law and the moral law.

Calvin can make allowance for the “common law of nations” because he recognizes in the midst of the changeable, local, and temporal aspects of the laws of peoples a permanent, necessary, and universally valid content: the underlying rule and purpose of all positive law, which rule he calls “equity.” Thus, he can say: “Equity, as it is natural, cannot but be the same in all, and therefore ought to be proposed by all laws, according to the nature of the thing enacted. As constitutions have some circumstances on which they partly depend, there is nothing to prevent their diversity, provided they all alike aim at equity as their end.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the *lex naturae* is rooted in and related to the *lex Dei*. Or as Calvin has aptly put it:

Now, as it is evident that the law of God which we call moral, is nothing else than the testimony of natural law, and of that conscience which God has engraven on the minds of men, the whole of his equity of which we now speak is prescribed in it. Hence it alone ought to be the aim, the rule, and the end of all laws. Wherever laws are formed after this rule, directed to this aim, and restricted to this end, there is no reason why they should be disapproved by us, however much they may differ from the Jewish law or from each other.<sup>5</sup>

Calvin, therefore, is quite realistic in his critical appraisal of the relation of the form of law and right (*constitutio*) and the innermost content of the law, that is, equity (*aequitas*). The legislation of a given country is not to be considered inferior merely because its mode of punishment for certain offenses differs from that of the Jewish law. Circumstances make necessary severer edicts or a relaxation of the severity of certain laws. Thus, Calvin reasons:

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 537–538.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 537.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 538.

<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*

In time of war, civilization would disappear amid the noise of arms, were not men overawed by an unwonted severity of punishment. In sterility, in pestilence, were not stricter discipline employed, all things would grow worse. One nation might be more prone to a particular vice, were it not most severely repressed. How malignant were it, and invidious of the public good, to be offended at this diversity, which is admirably adapted to retain the observance of the divine law.<sup>6</sup>

It is, furthermore, to be remembered that the natural law for Calvin is not the sum total of rational principles, as the Stoics conceived it, nor the result of man's rational thought processes, as Aristotle described it, nor is it a mere instinctive urge, but rather the law of the living God. Nor does natural man know the full purport of this natural law, since man is a fallen creature. That men have, despite the fall and original sin, the capacity to distinguish between good and evil, between right and wrong; that men show a certain wisdom in the management of daily life, whether personal or governmental; that men by means of reason are able to explore the cosmos; all these capacities are ultimately part of the common grace which God has left to mankind.

Again, the fact that God had to give Israel and through it to the world at large—the written law of the Decalogue is testimony to the fact that the knowledge of the natural law had become vague and insufficient. Hence, to the believer at least, the Decalogue, as it were, replaces the natural law, since it clearly expounds the will of God for our life and conduct. God's law, revealed in Holy Writ, is therefore the supreme law of all social life; it is also the only rule for the government of Christ's church. Chenevière has well summed up the whole range of Calvin's thought with reference to law in its various aspects. He says:

Therefore, whether we turn to the actual natural law or towards the actual sense of natural order or towards the hindrances of authority, we are always dealing with the gifts of God, given for the purpose that a world which man's sin leads to chaos, may become, not an ideal world or even the beginning of such, but an order of expectancy which simply allows man to live on this earth before yielding to the Kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Institutes*, p. 539.

<sup>7</sup> Chenevière, *op. cit.*, p. 111.



## Calvin's View of the Best Form of Government

CONSIDERABLE difference of opinion has prevailed through recent debate of this problem. Some have branded Calvin the arch-foe of democracy. Thus McGiffert! Kampschulte, the Catholic historian, has gone out of his way to make of Calvin an aristocrat of the purest dye. Yet, despite the varying and often conflicting interpretations, it is significant that even a man like McGiffert had to admit that indirectly, at least, Calvin did much to break the power of the papacy in Western Europe. Many Anglo-American interpreters of modern history since the Reformation are convinced that while Calvin did not favor democracy as such, he nevertheless set influences to work which in time led to the consolidation of personal liberty and the establishment of democracy.

In the *Institutes* Calvin considers the matter of what constitutes the best form of government to be a rather unimportant matter. Historic circumstances, problems of utility, the nature of a people, as well as the secret providence of God operative in all human affairs, these determine the best form of government among men. But what he is supremely concerned about is the recognition that God is the primary source of all government regardless of its form. }

Each form of government, be it monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy, has its advantages and its dangers. Monarchy is prone to tyranny, aristocracy to the role of a clique, while democracy tends to confusion and sedition. Calvin, it seems, preferred a mixed form of government, that is, a mixture of aristocracy and democracy. What he always opposed, both in the church and in the state, was the uncontrolled and uncontrollable rule of one man or of a few strong-willed men. The absolute ruler, Calvin held, too easily }

transcends the bounds of his authority and the limits of his office. As Hausherr has said: "Der entscheidende Faktor fuer die Guete einer Regierung ist also nicht die Moeglichkeit hoechster Kraeftentfaltung, sondern die Maessigung."<sup>1</sup>

"Liberty with becoming moderation," to use a phrase from the *Institutes*,<sup>2</sup> perhaps characterizes best what Calvin was striving after with regard to the best form of government. Each ruler, be he a king, prince, or president, is to guard against the suppression of the freedom of his subjects and the abuse of his God-given power. Strong emphasis is always laid upon the constitutional safeguards against regal caprice and tyrannical pride.

In view of these facts Bohatec is perhaps right when he criticizes those who, like Doumergue, have tried to declare Calvin to be the founder of our modern liberties and the Rights of Man; while men like Kampschulte, Francis de Crue, or Fazy have classified him as the advocate of a pure aristocracy. Bohatec and Hausherr and, in a limited fashion, Troeltsch and Baron, are inclined toward holding the view that Calvin advocated the mixed form of government which we mentioned above. The French edition of the *Institutes* brings out this mixed form most clearly. There we read: "The preeminence of those who shall govern is to keep people free. The rulers of a people shall apply all diligence to this that the franchise of the people whose protectors they are is by no means decreased under their hands."<sup>3</sup>

Calvin finds this mixed form of government best exemplified in the history of ancient Israel. Thus it has the sanction of the Lord himself, since "he established an aristocracy bordering on popular government among the Israelites, keeping them under that as the best form, until he exhibited an image of the Messiah in David."<sup>4</sup> But here again, not the form of any government but the fact that God has ordained various forms of government for the welfare of mankind is of decisive importance.

A study of Calvin's interpretation of the era of the judges and

<sup>1</sup> Hausherr, *Op. cit.*, p. 70. "The decisive factor for the quality of a government is therefore not the possibility of its highest development of power, but moderation."

<sup>2</sup> *Institutes*, II, III, chap. 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Opera* 4, 1134.

<sup>4</sup> *Institutes*, II, IV, 528.

of the election of Israel's first king, Saul, as well as the latter's forerunner Samuel, is also quite revealing for the understanding of Calvin's view. Here, the emphasis is upon the fact that the judges were public leaders, exercising both a judicial and an administrative function. Then, too, Calvin points out that some of the judges were elected by the people. Likewise, Samuel held the office of judge in Israel, having been elected by the people to that office.

In the election of the Seventy (Num. 11: 16) Calvin sees a precedent for the post-exilic development of the Sanhedrin. In both institutions the members are elected from among worthy representative men of the people. Character, experience, general fitness mark these men.

In closing, suffice it to say that Calvin had as Bohatec has well said "a pathos for order." His is an organic and organismic view of the state. Exaggerated freedom leads to chaos. In this Calvin sided with Aristotle. His theory of a divine calling for each man with its correlate of service that each person renders to the other precluded an extreme form of equalitarian democracy. But this type of government which Calvin endorsed was eventually to lead to the development of more democratic forms of government in the new world, particularly in the American Colonies and the present United States of America. If Calvin were to live amongst us today he would no doubt be shocked both by the totalitarian and the secularizing tendencies in government and politics. Our present tendency and confusion of mind, so prevalent in the Western world, to think more of rights and little of obligations would meet with his just criticism. And whatever critical strictures historians may raise against Calvin's political thinking with respect to what constitutes the just form of government, it is increasingly admitted that it was "Calvinist political thought which helped more than any other tendency of the time to prevent the full victory of absolutism, and to prepare the way for constitutional and even republican ideas."<sup>5</sup>

A glance at Calvin's relation to the Genevan state may be useful.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Baron, "Calvinist Republicanism and Its Historical Roote," *Church History*, VIII (March, 1939), 41.



According to the entries of the *Registres Conseils* or council records of Geneva, it was on November 21, 1541, that a commission was appointed with a view to formulating a new city constitution. Calvin, who had just returned to Geneva from Strasbourg, was at once made a member of this commission, but, due to his preoccupation with the *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques*, he was at first unable to give proper attention to this matter. It was not until the spring of 1542 that the reformer could actively participate in the work of the commission. Until that time its spirit lagged, little was accomplished, but as soon as Calvin lent his hand its work progressed with great dispatch. In fact, Calvin became the leading member of the commission. As he was the driving power in the church, so he also became the driving power in the Genevan city-state.

The legislation that was being studied and reformulated by this commission was not something altogether new, but rather the co-ordination and improvement of existing laws into a more coherent system. Old constitutions were constantly consulted in order to formulate the elements of the new city constitution.

Some writers have claimed that Calvin was chiefly responsible for the aristocratic character of the new *Edits Politiques* (Political Edicts) which came to be finally accepted on January 28, 1543. Such is the opinion of Henri Fazy, a view which he has laid down in his work entitled *Les Constitutions de la République de Genève*. Others, like A. Roget, the author of the *Histoire du Peuple de Genève* have argued for the idea that Calvin was little more than a docile member of the commission. Against the former view, it may be said that the aristocratic tendencies which are laid at the door of John Calvin had been operative in Geneva long before he ever set foot in that city. Any one who knows anything about the development of the power and authority of the various City Councils of Geneva must admit that to be a fact. It may be nearer to the truth to say that Calvin took a most decisive part in the deliberations of the commission drawing up the new Genevan city constitution.

That the city fathers thought most highly of Calvin's juristic talents is shown by the fact that they, as well as the Genevan church, relieved him of the weekly sermons so that he might devote himself better to the work in hand. It was Calvin who re-

viewed and proofread the entire original of these new Edicts.<sup>6</sup> The whole document breathes Calvin's spirit and insight. Kamp-schulte, the Catholic historian of Munich, is witness to the fact that until the eighteenth century many of the notations, just as Calvin penned and formulated them in the years of 1542 and 1543, retained the force of law.

Underlying the body of law thus formulated in 1543 and in force till most recent times was the idea that it is not the quantitative, arithmetical number of persons exercising governmental functions but rather the qualitative worth of persons that determines excellency and skill in the art of government. That is an insight that may be useful even to contemporary statesmen and leaders of government.

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<sup>6</sup> Fazy, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

## *Epilogue*

IN THE foregoing pages an attempt has been made to determine what Martin Luther and John Calvin, the two most outstanding Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, thought of the nature, purpose, and scope of the church and its relation to the state. By copious references to the extant writings and sources the author of this book has sought to let these influential Christian thinkers state their basic opinions and convictions of these matters. That the two reformers did not hold our modern concept of the state as secular in character and therefore neutral in religion, has been pointed out in various contexts. The complexity of their position seems fairly well attested by the variety and often contradictory interpretations among competent Reformation scholars. However, we must nevertheless keep in mind that Luther and Calvin were in basic agreement on the spiritual nature of the church—a church divested of temporal prerogatives—and on the divinely ordained character of the state. Because both reformers strongly believed in the absolute sovereignty of the living God, they opposed all absolutism and irresponsibility of rulers. Kings are mortal men accountable to God; they are by no means gods. Likewise, churchmen, whatever their office, are mortal men and ever subject to God's judgment. >

To do full justice to Luther and Calvin with regard to their teachings concerning government, we must never forget that they were not primarily political theorists but theologians possessed of a profound and unshakable faith in God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Neither Calvin nor Luther—nor any of the other reformers for that matter—can be properly understood except in terms of their fundamental Christian and evangelical convictions and outlook.



The world, particularly the Christian world, owes a great debt to Luther and Calvin. The churches that trace their history to the reformatory efforts of these men do not think of them as infallible guides or even as religious geniuses. They are best understood as teachers and prophets of the church to whom the Lord of the church showed new perspectives and depths of Christian truth. They rediscovered, each in his own way, the purity and dynamics of the New Testament doctrine of the free grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. With fresh vigor and tremendous earnestness, they declared God's sovereign will and purpose over the life of men and nations. Their advocacy of the freedom of each evangelical believer from priestcraft and sacerdotalism, their appeal to the open Bible and a Spirit-led conscience, their destruction of papal supremacy and the hierarchical control of society and culture, and their overcoming of the medieval dualism of sacred and secular spheres of life through an ethos of Christian vocation, represent some of the lasting achievements of these two reformers.

To a contemporary student, the forces operative in the life and thought of Luther and Calvin may seem strangely bewildering and out of step with modern ideas. For the Reformation brought not peace but a sword. Catholic apologists of today point an accusing finger at these sixteenth century reformers as the fountain-head of all our present troubles. Overanxious Protestants likewise are tempted to bemoan some of the consequences of the Reformation movement. We hear much in these days of "the shame of a divided Christendom," particularly among ardent ecumenicists. And who can deny that the more than two hundred Protestant denominations now existing among us are ultimately products of the Reformation? Yet, it is also true that both Luther and Calvin thought of themselves as restorers of the true church, not its destroyers. The papal church they considered to be the church of antichrist. It was utterly unthinkable to them that their work was anything but reformatory and restorative. Their aim was constructive and not destructive. Though they rent the church of their day, they helped to revive Christendom (Bainton). Even the Catholic Church emerged out of the struggles of the Reformation period a purer, better church.

Though the reformers intended merely to reform the church,

the effects of their labors was in more than one sense revolutionary. Developments in the religious, social, and political spheres of life since the days of the Reformation bear out its revolutionary implications. Like every movement in which erring humans have a part, Luther's as well as Calvin's work contained limitations and serious flaws. What were these limitations and flaws?

As far as Luther is concerned, it is well known that he did not, at first, intend linking his evangelical reform movement with the temporal rulers of his day. But the disturbed conditions of the German Reich, the lack of evangelicals who had been trained in maintaining self-governing churches, the fear of radical sectaries such as Thomas Münzer, as well as a shift from his earlier and more independent position to a more cautious attitude caused Luther to turn to the Protestant princes for help. These in turn aided the reformer of Wittenberg and his co-workers to establish territorial churches (*Landeskirchen*). The "godly or Christian prince"—that is, the civil ruler of a given territory—eventually became the titular governor (or bishop) of the Lutheran Church's administrative-juridical and, finally, even doctrinal matters.

The moderate Anabaptists of Switzerland and Southern Germany clearly saw in Luther's own day the evil consequences of establishment. They opposed this system without evasion, establishing their own congregations on the basis of the strict separation of church and state. It was only logical that a century later the early British and American Baptists should advocate the doctrine of soul freedom: the competence of each man or woman to decide for or against God without interference from ecclesiastical or civil authorities. This doctrine the churches derived from the Reformation—Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican—were very slow in learning.

The late Professor J. L. Neve, outstanding American Lutheran scholar, has said that the establishment of Lutheran territorial churches

laid the foundation for a continuing injury to Lutheranism from which Germany is suffering to this present day. The time came when the Church had to bear the yoke of the State for definite service. Some of the worst cases may be seen in the forced introduction of the Church Union of Prussia (after 1817) and other parts of Germany. Very

generally the Church was degraded into a mere factor of civilization, in line with the education through school, theater and press. In times of war, through the pulpit, it was her task to stir the sentiment of the nation for the cause of the country irrespective of right and wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Heinrich Hermelink in a recently published work has said that the former dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nationality in 1806 led, among other consequences, to the absolute "unity of Church and State,"<sup>2</sup> with the church completely subordinated to secular authority. Abetted by the forces of the French Revolution, the power drive of the central German states, and the ideas of an enlightened absolutism in government, the sovereign territorial princes of Germany became the unquestioned overlords of the churches. This "revolution from above" effected the secularization of the Protestant churches to a hitherto unheard of degree. Hegel's philosophy of the state, this author concludes, set the capstone upon this state-controlled church system where "in principle the police state also controlled the sanctuary."<sup>3</sup> Surely, a fatal development since Luther's days, a development which the reformer himself would have deplored.

State churchism is of necessity monopolistic, intolerant and coercive. Through these past four centuries the state churches of Germany and adjacent countries, of England and colonial America have, with rare exceptions, all become guilty of persecuting dissenters for the sake of their faith. Even in the enlightened nineteenth century, Baptists, Methodists, and other nonconformists found themselves harrassed and persecuted in Germany, Scandinavia, and in the British Isles. Men like Johann Gerhard Oncken, founder of the Baptist movement in Germany and on the European continent (after 1834), sat many times in jail in the free city of Hamburg for the sake of his evangelical faith. Civil disabilities were suffered by Free Churchmen in Germany and England from the days of the Reformation to the present century.<sup>4</sup>

Before the emancipation of the Jews in the thirties of the last century the poet Heinrich Heine was compelled to undergo Chris-

<sup>1</sup> Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom*, pp. 217-18.

<sup>2</sup> Hermelink, *Das Christentum in der Menschheitsgeschichte*, 1. Band, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest A. Payne, *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England*, p. 127.



tian baptism in the Lutheran Church of Germany in order to be admitted to the bar. A Baptist or Methodist could not become a public school teacher or an officer in the German army until after 1918, when the overthrow of the Hohenzollern regime made possible greater religious liberties.

It is important to point out that the secular authorities both in England and Germany were often more liberal in interpreting existing laws against dissenters than the defenders of establishment. "The ecclesiastical authorities were hostile to any and every concession,"<sup>5</sup> wrote Ernest A. Payne, eminent British Baptist church historian!

That democracy, launched in Germany after 1918 under the most adverse circumstances, finally succumbed to an aggressive national socialistic attack is due, partly at least, to the incessant incrimination of the Weimar Republic by monarchically inclined conservative clergy of the German Evangelical Lutheran churches. Martin Rade, professor of Marburg University, wrote in 1929: "Where do Christians really defend the Republic? All that I can see is that Christians continually and passionately fight against the Republic."<sup>6</sup>

It is a good omen that men like Hans Asmussen have openly indicted the idea of the *Volkskirche* or people's church as contrary to the conceptions of the Augsburg Confession of 1530. However, despite his misgivings the reconstituted Evangelical Church of Germany, reorganized after the Trysa Conference of 1946, is still being financially maintained and supported, in part at least, by the various German *Laender* or territories.

In fairness we must, however, also note that despite these limitations and handicaps under which the Lutheran churches of Europe have had to labor, their contribution to theological learning, popular and advanced education, church music, literature, and philosophy has been tremendous. Lutherans of Germany have also made a great contribution in missions. The best organized mission church, the Batak Church of Sumatra, Indonesia, numbering a half million members, is a fruit of the work of the Rhenish Evangelical Lutheran Missionary Society since 1860. Johann

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> Rade, *Christliche Welt*, Nr. 16 (1929), p. 907.

Sebastian Bach, the Thomas Cantor of Leipzig, was a Lutheran composer whose immortal music has enriched the worship of Christians everywhere. What the Lutheran ethos of faith working in love can produce in social reconstruction may be seen in the way in which the German people dug themselves out from the ruins and devastation of the Thirty Years' War. The oft repeated charge that Luther's teachings engendered a cadaverous obedience of Germans to their rulers is, to say the least, an oversimplification of the facts. Lutheran court preachers again and again denounced their rulers. Some of them, as a consequence of their courage and devotion to truth, lost home and hearth, yea, even their lives. Ziegenbalg, a Lutheran missionary to India after 1706, like a prophet of old, denounced the Danish governor of Trankebar. He likewise fought slavery when Dutch, British, and colonial Americans majored in the traffic of human flesh. In statesmanship, the Lutheran ethos is best exemplified in King Gustaf Adolf and Charles XII of Sweden, Freiherr von Stein and Bismarck of Prussia, and Johann Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg, a Lutheran pastor from Virginia and General of the Continental Army under Washington.<sup>7</sup> And it was a Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemoeller, who dared to withstand Hitler vigorously in his pulpit despite the danger to himself. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an eminent young Lutheran scholar, was murdered by the Nazis in the spring of 1945.

In view of the avowed principle of the separation of church and state in the United States, it is a sad commentary on the policies of our American occupation forces in post-war Germany that, with American official help, the old territorial church system, as it existed prior to 1933, has been re-established. That is the charge of Hermann Sasse, formerly of Erlangen University, and of Hermann Diem, author of *America, Impressions and Questions*, a book published in 1949. Whereas, during the German church struggle under the Hitler regime, much progress had been made to develop mature congregations within the confessional movement (*Bekennende Kirche*) and to secure the spiritual and economic independence and liberty of the churches, Diem charges that after 1945, with the active support of American occupation

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<sup>7</sup> For detailed information read Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, Vol. II (Neudruck, 1953).

authorities, "the old centralized Church bureaucracy and the clamor for state privileges"<sup>8</sup> have returned. Needless to say, this development since World War II found also encouragement from leading Lutheran churchmen within Germany who, like the Bourbons of Napoleon's days, had learned nothing of history.

The churches that stem from John Calvin have, on the whole, a better record with regard to the maintenance of the church's freedom from the state. It is true that neither Luther nor Calvin were tolerant or democratic in our modern understanding of these terms. Calvin himself and the Congregationalist-Puritan churches of New England indulged in the persecution of dissenters. Yet, as Winthrop Hudson has well pointed out, "it is a mistake to identify Calvinism with a small group of New England oligarchs as if they were representative of the movement as a whole. Not only is this to ignore Ponet, Goodman, Knox, Beza, Hotman, Mornay, William of Orange, Althusius and a good many others who certainly stood in the Reformed tradition; it is to substitute what became a minor current for the major stream."<sup>9</sup> It is false "to regard Calvinism as a static body of political dogma. The contribution of Calvinism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries cannot be measured by what Calvin said in 1536."<sup>10</sup>

Hudson rightly asserts—and scholars like Baron, John T. McNeill, Lindsay of Oxford, and Crane Brinton of Harvard concur in this opinion—that Calvin's uncompromising fundamental postulate of the absolute sovereignty of God and his insistence upon limited sovereignty and government under law "provided the potential basis for the elaboration of democratic ideas."<sup>11</sup>

Admittedly, egalitarian democracy is not an idea in favor with Calvin. He is afraid of the anarchistic tendencies of such a form of government. "Nevertheless, his notion of 'aristocracy tempered by democracy' approaches our conception of representative democracy."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Diem, *Amerika-Eindrücke und Fragen*, 1949, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Winthrop Hudson. "Democratic Freedom and Religious Faith in the Reformed Tradition," *Church History* XV (Sept., 1946), p. 179.

<sup>10</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> John T. McNeill. "The Democratic Element in Calvin's Thought," *Church History* XVIII (Sept., 1949), p. 162.



Baptists, the majority of which have stood in the theological tradition of Calvinism, have been pioneers in the doctrine of soul liberty and its correlate, the separation of church and state. Roger Williams, as Bainton and Moehlman have pointed out, interpreted the Calvinist doctrine of predestination in such a way as to favor the doctrine of soul liberty. Recently, Professor Robert Hastings Nichols, has also indicated the confluence of many ideas and movements within the Reformed tradition (and also without it!) that finally led to the emergence of our modern idea of democracy. What were these ideas and movements? Firstly, constitutionalism in classical Calvinism with its emphasis of limitations on sovereignty as a religious duty; secondly, the Reformed idea of God's covenant with his people; thirdly, the Anabaptist principle of the gathered church idea which the Puritan Independents adopted for their separatist churches; fourthly, the Spiritualist emphasis on the Holy Spirit and his continuing ministry illuminating the mind of the church; lastly, natural law doctrines, known to the Stoics of antiquity, and to medieval political theorists, and to the men of the Enlightenment. Nichols sums the matter up in these words:

The congregational covenant of the gathered church meant an individualizing of the Reformed covenant between God and his people. The latter had its political equivalent in the "governmental compact" of the political theorists, in the name of which rulers could be called to account by the people. The gathered church was an association constituted by the voluntary adherence of each of its individual members to the specific constitution instituted by Jesus Christ. The political equivalent of the gathered church, consequently, was the social contract," according to which the political community itself was conceived as constituted by an explicit or tacit "owning of the covenant" by each citizen. In these matters, John Locke, the classic theorist of Anglo-American democracy, showed himself a true son of the Puritan Independents.<sup>13</sup>

Nichols gives full credit to the Baptists who, in the American colonies, carried forward the left-wing Puritan witness that aimed at, and finally realized, the dream of full religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

<sup>13</sup> James Hastings Nichols, *Democracy and the Churches*, p. 32.

The rise of totalitarian governments in Europe and Asia has brought the issues of tension between church and state to sharpest focus. Eternal vigilance, now as always, is the price of liberty.

Protestants and other interpreters differ as to whether the United States may be called a Christian nation. The Roman Catholic Church has officially condemned our American principle of the separation of church and state. Moehlman is convinced that "the American Protestant age begins with the communion service at Jamestown and ends in principle with the adoption of Amendment I."<sup>14</sup> He defends the thesis that the American system of government is secular in intention, purpose, and authority. Other interpreters would still maintain that ours is a Christian nation where Christian sanctions are in force to safeguard the best interests of society. From a strictly New Testament vista there has never been a Christian state or nation. But regardless of this fact, Americans, in judging Luther's and Calvin's views on church and state, ought never to forget that even in our land, favored beyond many other peoples of the world, the struggle for religious freedom and separation of church and state has been a long and painful one. As we have seen above, many complex forces, religious and secular, as well as circumstances and expediency, worked toward the establishment of representative government and a free church in a free state.

If we grasp the deeper intentions of the reformers, we shall increasingly realize that *all* human institutions are subject to corruption and, hence, are under God's judgment. The temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness face us even in a free society.

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<sup>14</sup> Conrad Henry Moehlman, *School and Society*, p. 3.

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